

**University of KwaZulu-Natal**

**Popular Performance: Youth, Identity and Tradition in  
KwaZulu-Natal: The Work of a Selection of Isicathamiya  
Choirs in Emkhambathini**

**By**

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# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Acknowledgments  | i         |
| Table of Contents  | ii        |
| Abstract   | iii       |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>                               | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1: <i>Isicathamiya</i> Defined                             | 5         |
| 1.2: Translating and Transcribing                            | 7         |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>Chapter 2: Re-inventing Traditional Constructs</b>        | <b>10</b> |
| 2.1: Traditional Stereotypes in the Practice of Popular Arts | 13        |
| 2.2: The Role of Proverbs in Traditional Re-invention        | 14        |
| 2.3: Pasts and Presents                                      | 17        |
| 2.4: Traditional Movement Re-invented                        | 22        |
| 2.5: Going Against the Dress Code                            | 25        |
| 2.6: Multilayered Tradition                                  | 26        |
| 2.7: Summary   | 28        |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>Chapter 3: Stretching the Boundary</b>                    | <b>30</b> |
| 3.1: Leaving Home  | 32        |
| 3.2: Changing Audiences                                      | 35        |
| 3.3: Popular Memory  | 38        |
| 3.4: Women   | 44        |
| 3.4.1: Women Performers                                      | 44        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 3.4.2: Women as Subjects of Performance                       | 47        |
| 3.5: Summary  | 49        |
| <br>  |           |
| <b>Chapter 4: Masculinities</b>                               | <b>50</b> |
| 4.1: Masculinity in the Zulu Nation                           | 52        |
| 4.2: Adapting Migrant Masculinities: The 'Masculine Provider' | 53        |
| 4.3: Collective Authority and Hegemonic Masculinity           | 61        |
| 4.4: Performing Masculinity Through the Body                  | 68        |
| 4.5: The Leader   | 71        |
| 4.6: Summary  | 73        |
| <br>  |           |
| Conclusion  | 75        |
| Bibliography  | 76        |
| Appendix A: Interview with Jan Mbuli                          | 82        |

## **Abstract**

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the study of African popular arts and performance genres. In this study, I will focus on *isicathamiya*, a South African musical performance genre, and in particular the attempt of its practitioners to create new identities and a new sense of self through their own interpretation of the genre. This study will concentrate on the '*isicathamiya* youth' in the semi-rural community of Emkhambathini (located about 30 kilometres east of Pietermaritzburg) and their strategies of self-definition in the New South Africa.

*Isicathamiya* has strong roots in migrant labour and this has been the main focal point around which many researchers have concentrated. However, recent years have seen a movement of *isicathamiya* concentrated within rural and semi-rural communities such as Emkhambathini. The performers in these areas have a unique interpretation of the genre and use it to communicate their thoughts and identities to a diverse audience made up of young and old. In this study I will be looking at the '*isicathamiya* youth' within three broad categories, the re-invention of tradition, the re-interpretation of the genre, and issues of masculinities. Each of these categories accounts for the three chapters within this study and serves to give a broad yet in-depth study of the 'new wave' of *isicathamiya* performers.

The first chapter, entitled 'Traditional Re-invention', will deal with issues relating to the project of traditional 'redefinition' which the '*isicathamiya* youth' are pursuing in Emkhambathini. I will show that tradition is not a stagnant concept, but is in fact ever-changing over time and place, a concept that does not carry one definition over

an entire community. Through various song texts and frames of analysis I will attempt to show how tradition is being used to further the construction of positive identities within Emkhambathini and give youth a place in Zulu tradition and in a multi-layered modernity.

The second chapter will deal with how the '*isicathamiya* youth' raise and stretch the boundaries of the genre in relation to a number of concepts. These concepts include topics of performance, women and popular memory and serve to give a broader view as to what the '*isicathamiya* youth' are trying to achieve, namely a new positive self identity that seeks to empower the youth in the New South Africa.

The last chapter will look at issues of masculinity and how the youth use different strategies to regain the masculine identities of their fathers and grandfathers and maintain patriarchal authority. Issues looked at within this chapter will include men's role within society and their perceptions of women.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Popular arts are at the forefront of contemporary African expression and genres such as *isicathamiya* allow their performers the freedom to translate everyday experiences into art forms. However, popular arts (and performance) are not simply there to represent these experiences, but also to create and communicate new ideas and understandings through their production (Barber, *Popular Arts in Africa* 2). As Johannes Fabian argues, popular performance does not merely respond to social conditions, but in fact helps in the ‘cultivation and creation’ of them (Fabian, *Popular Culture in Africa* 316). The rise and recognition of African popular arts, such as *isicathamiya*, has led to a greater understanding of the production of arts in Africa. The popular arts, argues Karin Barber, have created a space in the perception of African cultural production previously believed to consist entirely of ‘traditional’ or ‘elite’ genres that did not interact (Barber, *African Popular Culture* 1). However, as I will argue in my first chapter, popular arts such as *isicathamiya* do not exist solely in an area between ‘traditional’ and ‘elite’, rather they tend to move freely between the two concepts.

*Isicathamiya* is a performance genre that grew from an early generation of Zulu labourers forced into urbanisation by political and economic factors. From the early 1900’s, these migrant workers created a space for themselves through a creative mix of contemporary and traditional influences that allowed them to keep hold of their cultural heritage while taking inspiration from more modern performance genres such as ragtime and blackface. The political factors surrounding black South Africans at the time of *isicathamiya*’s emergence accounts for it being widely known as a

‘migrant genre’ by the many that encountered it in the urban centres of apartheid South Africa. The Urban Areas Act, first instituted in 1923 and amended throughout the next five decades, aimed to force non-working black South Africans out of the cities and into designated areas or homelands (Davenport 548). The result was a vast contingent of Black migrant labourers forced to leave their families behind and to start a new life in the city hostels. *Isicathamiya* provided a space for these displaced workers to express themselves within the unfamiliar urban areas was a genre formed out of the cruelties and restrictions of the times. Evidence of this can be seen in the name ‘*isicathamiya*’ (which means to walk like a cat), a name that was coined when migrant workers realised their loud and energetic traditional performance genres were not suited to cramped urban living conditions, in fact most of these traditional genres were discouraged by other workers because they were seen as too noisy (*MBUBE: The Night of the Lion*). However, with the abolishing of apartheid in 1994 and the subsequent closure of many of these hostels, *isicathamiya* found a new home among the semi-rural communities of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Emkhambathini is one such area, about thirty kilometres from Pietermaritzburg, this partly rural community is a haven for new and young *isicathamiya* performers who are using the genre to ‘talk to the people’. These performers deal with anything from AIDS and unemployment to love and cultural history. A limited amount of research has already been generated in regards to *isicathamiya* in post-apartheid settings; Imogen Gunner’s study of the ‘*Mkambathini Try Singers*’ (2003), Liz Gunner’s work on *isicathamiya* and AIDS (2005), as well Simone Johnson’s thesis on *isicathamiya* and its ties to migrancy (2001) have all contributed significantly toward this study and made a greater body of work available to researchers within the field. Veit Erlmann’s extensive work on *isicathamiya* has also proved an invaluable resource for this study. For this study I



will also look at a selection of young *isicathamiya* groups from Emkhambathini, many of whom I observed during my fieldwork with the NRF-funded project ‘Performance, Meaning and Identity’<sup>1</sup>. I will also use a number of video and audiotapes that have been collected by the project members.

In the true spirit of popular arts (discussed above in the first paragraph), young *isicathamiya* choirs have helped create new social and cultural conditions within the communities they perform. During my brief period of work with young *isicathamiya* choirs, I witnessed the creation and validation of many social projects; the ‘de-silencing’ of the AIDS and HIV virus and active resistance against governmental bureaucracy and corruption. Finally another key aspect of popular art is its relationship with ‘the people’, either emanating directly from or belonging to them (Barber, *Popular Arts in Africa* 7). Popular art “furthers the cause of the people by opening their eyes to their objective situation in society” (Barber, *Popular Arts in Africa* 7) and prepares them to act in accordance with their situation. In semi-rural communities such as Emkhambathini, almost all *isicathamiya* choirs are made of locally based members. These choirs tackle issues pertaining directly to their local and global society and speak directly to their audience through their performances, setting *isicathamiya* apart from more commercialised forms of art. Although many songs may carry meaning outside of the community, *isicathamiya* choirs always deal with issues directly affecting the space around them.

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<sup>1</sup> These field trips took the form of two competitions in the Emkhambathini No. 3 area, as well as two visits to Elandskop (an area about fifty kilometres west of Pietermaritzburg) where project members attended a concert and a memorial service where four *isicathamiya* groups performed. The members of the group included, Prof. Liz Gunner, Wiseman Masango, Dolly Simelane, Imogen Gunner, Khulekani Ngubane and myself.

The idea of performance as 'text' is one that must be addressed in this study. Karin Barber refers to the 'cultural materialism' and 'new historicism' that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, refusing to privilege literary texts above other cultural texts and therefore opening the door for performance genres to be viewed and studied as 'texts' (*Yoruba Popular Life* 7). Also, work done by ethnographer Johannes Fabian has helped cement performance's place as a 'text' in academic study. Fabian recognises each single performance as a unique text rather than a depiction of an already existing one:

A text is not a representation, much less a symbol or icon, of a communicative event, it **is** that event in its textual realization. A performance does not 'express' something in need of being brought to the surface, or to the outside; nor does it simply enact a preexisting text. Performance **is** the text in the moment of its actualisation. (*Power and Performance* 9)

Hence not only are the written songs in *isicathamiya* regarded as texts, but also all other aspects of the performance from dance to dress to audience response. The acknowledgement of performance as 'text' has allowed the study of meaning and message within all performance genres and given academic scholars the license to pursue projects that deal with unique performative genres such as *isicathamiya*.

My study will consist of three chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion) that will deal with three key areas in this new youth movement within *isicathamiya*. The first chapter will highlight the changing notions of tradition among these young performers and how they communicate these changes in their performances. The second chapter will concentrate on how these young choirs are stretching the rules or boundaries of the genre to encompass their audience and lifestyle. The third chapter will focus on the shift of masculine identities within *isicathamiya* as a result of factors

such as the de-urbanisation of the genre and the changing roles of men within rural communities.

### 1.1 *Isicathamiya* Defined

*Isicathamiya* is a genre born out of migrant labour with many historical roots, some of which extend across national boundaries over into American, European and British performance genres. Traditional influences cannot be overlooked either, for example some aspects of traditional Zulu wedding dances bear striking resemblances to even contemporary *isicathamiya* performances. This mixture of western and traditional genres is perhaps best described by Erlmann:

*isicathamiya* was born of the meeting between two social worlds, two worldviews, in other words, two vastly different sets of images of personal identity, sociability, and aesthetic value...The world of wage labor, cities, and racial oppression during the late nineteenth century was perhaps most clearly represented in Christian hymnody and in the prevailing genres, characters, and themes of popular entertainment of the time: the minstrel stage. The other world—the realm of migration, rural poverty, and moral emasculation—found a somewhat more ambiguous expression in a string of dances rooted in great part in precolonial concepts and practices (*Nightsong* 46 – 47).

Above all else, Erlmann emphasises that *isicathamiya* is ‘a meeting between two social worlds’, the precolonial and the colonial. Western genres such as ragtime and minstrel music find themselves interlocked with traditional Zulu song and dance. Like other African popular performance genres such as *kiba* (James) and Ghana Party Concert Theatre (Cole), *isicathamiya* is a hybrid of many different cultures and influences. Catherine Cole’s study on Ghana Party Concert Theatre reveals that the actors’ performance material was influenced by a wide range of art forms including ‘American movies’ and ‘African American spirituals’ (1). What this highlights is an

increase in hybridised African popular genres that draw inspiration from a wide array of different sources, allowing the popular arts to reach a greater and more diverse audience. *Isicathamiya* is part of this 'popular explosion', this widespread project to incorporate daily life and experience into all forms of artistic expression.

In this chapter I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of *isicathamiya* nor map the innumerable influences incorporated into the genre; rather I will attempt to give a brief explanation as to what *isicathamiya* actually is and how it is presented

It is important to note that *isicathamiya* is usually performed in competitive conditions. Choirs compete for prizes (usually cash) and a panel of judges who watch each choir closely decides positioning in the competition. *Isicathamiya* choirs are made up of a number of members, ranging from as few as four in number to as many as twenty-five. The choir will assemble on the stage, usually in a semi-circle or straight-line formation. Each choir appoints one member to lead the performance and he will stand separate from the rest of the choir, generally in front of the formation. Choirs are typically judged in three categories, singing, dress and dance. Each one of these categories is as important as the next and choirs must provide an impressive performance in all these areas to stand a chance of winning.

It is worth mentioning that the youth choirs mentioned in this study compete almost every week in various competitions around Emkhambathini and Pietermaritzburg, with some even venturing to Durban to contest for bigger prizes and more exposure to audiences outside of their immediate communities.

## 1.2. Translating and Transcribing

For the purpose of this study all the *isicathamiya* song texts have been transcribed and translated from Zulu into English<sup>2</sup>. For this I have used a number of translators, all of whom are native Zulu speakers who work and study in English. Although these translators are proficient in each of the two languages they deal with, the problems that translation and transcription bring to a study such as this cannot be overlooked. As Bassnett and Trivedi argue, “(t)ranslation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems” (2). It is this linguistic inequality within the translation process that must be recognised while reading the affected translated song texts within this study. In the next few paragraphs I will attempt to outline a few key problems encountered during this study.

The relationship between the signifying systems of the original language and the target language (in this study Zulu and English respectively) is an extremely problematic one for two reasons. Firstly, a problem occurs when there is “no linguistic or semantic equivalent of a word, phrase, or idiom in the target language” (Brown, *Voicing the Text* 12), a problem frequently encountered when translating between Zulu and English. Often the translator will have to insert a phrase in order to describe a single word, disrupting the natural flowing rhythm of the text. Secondly the rhythmic structures themselves differ within each language, meaning that the translation of the texts effectively distorts the rhythm and rhyme that is embedded

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that wherever possible original Zulu song texts have been supplied

within the original, a problem particularly apparent in translating performance texts such as *isicathamiya* songs (Brown, *Oral Literature in Africa* 5). What was originally a flowing and sharp composition could morph into a stuttered and unstructured text through the process of translation. Therefore, what we see on the page is never a true representation of the performance itself, instead it is the result of a direct interaction between two different culturally-based language systems, an interaction which is hardly ever equally balanced.

In his edited collection of *South African Oral Poetry*, Jeff Opland highlights the perils of transcription when dealing with oral sources. Opland emphasises the separation between the text and the performer when oral sources are presented on paper, transforming a unique performance into a ‘cold, lifeless object’ (18). This, I would argue, is not entirely true when dealing with performative texts. Although the performer is not present, their words, actions and meanings can still be extracted and understood through the study of a transcribed text. Although the meanings extracted in this study may not exclusively reflect the performer’s own intentions, any text, be it a book, a play or a performance is subject to third party reception and interpretation.

Another area of transcription that presents a problem is the presentation of the transcribed text. Again Opland recognises this dilemma in his own edited collection of Xhosa poetry and highlights the injustices done by transcribed performance texts;

(F)or example, some of the texts printed in this collection might well strike readers as short, but the words of a work song or of a lullaby can be repeated over and over until they achieve their desired effect, and the baby is lulled to sleep or the tedious work rhythmically regulated by the performances far more extensive than the bare words on a page suggest. (17)

Opland shows that although some of the performance texts within this study might seem brief or ineffective it is because the art of transcription does not allow for any of the creative styles mentioned by Opland above. The technique I have utilised during the transcription of *isicathamiya* texts is to rely on pauses in the performance to separate each line of the song texts. Although this might resemble a poetic layout, it must be remembered these texts were not created to be read but rather to be heard and seen.

Translation and transcription present many problems in a study such as this, but it is important to stress that these problems should not prohibit the study from taking place.

## Chapter 2: Shifting Traditions: Re-inventing Traditional Constructs

In this chapter I will examine various *isicathamiya* texts and performances and how they reflect modern Zulu youths'<sup>3</sup> perceptions of tradition. I hope to highlight *isicathamiya* as a genre that not only presents these perceptions, but also helps to define and change them as well. Most importantly I hope to show that Zulu tradition still plays a vital role in the shaping of the *isicathamiya* youths' identities.

During this chapter I will make reference to a brief interview with Jan Mbuli<sup>4</sup>, a member of the *Lover boys*, a successful young Ekhambathini group that have a great following among the young audiences of their home area.

With the re-emergence of Black South Africans into leading roles within the South African nation following the abolition of apartheid, 'traditional' culture is a site that is undergoing major transitions in the process of adjusting to a newfound freedom. Erlmann cites the re-evaluation of tradition as key in the wake of colonial-like oppression; "The reinterpretation of tradition, of selected master metaphors, is the fundamental strategy the displaced, marginalized, and powerless of Africa's neocolonial societies mobilize in the service of the creation of a positive self-identity" (*Nightsong* 135). However, the very concept of tradition remains a hugely contested space. In his investigation into African popular performance, David Coplan rejects the fixed notion of African tradition arguing that, "(t)he terms 'traditional' and 'folk' are

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<sup>3</sup> The word 'youth' in this study has been used to refer to a section of the young population who have entered the genre post-apartheid and have built their performances within the communities they originate from. Many of these performers still attend school and are relatively new to the realm of public performance; therefore they must be distinguished from the older, more experienced *isicathamiya* choirs usually found in urban areas such as Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for full interview transcript



in themselves examples of misplaced concreteness, since they come into being only with the reflexiveness born of colonialism, capitalist penetration, ethnic categorization and class formation.” (*Popular Culture and Performance* 1). Tradition, as this chapter will show, does give young choirs the ability to leave their own mark on their culture and therefore can result in a ‘positive self-identity’. However, if tradition is not viewed as a flexible concept the creation of new traditional identities will remain impossible and traditional constructs will provide a fruitless site for young performers.

At first glance *isicathamiya* does not lend itself to a ‘colonial’ idea of Zulu tradition; the dance, the dress and the verbal texts all disagree with ‘reflexive’ and ‘capitalised’ notions of Zulu culture. However, as Coplan argues, ‘tradition’ is a term often used to refer to a fixed space in time, a space that allows neither for a history before colonial intrusion nor a future past it. The great *isicathamiya* performer and composer, Joseph Shabalala, recognises the genre as connected to all aspects of Zulu culture, “the ancestral, the divine, the traditional, the social, the natural” (Ballantine 254), a notion that suggests *isicathamiya* has deep roots in Zulu ethnicity and consciousness.

Torgeir Fjeld investigates the idea of tradition as ‘invention’, linking the changing of society with the continuing invention of tradition. Fjeld postulates that as ‘old’ social dynamics collapse and evolve, notions of tradition change and look towards new set of social patterns (393). During the interview (See appendix 1) with *Lover boys* member Jan Mbuli, it was clear that he felt *isicathamiya* had a place within Zulu notions of tradition, suggesting that this was not a disputed view amongst the group members or the youth in the area. Jan assured me that the genre was ‘very traditional’

in every sense. Although Jan acknowledged the inter-genre influences within *isicathamiya*, it seemed that notions of tradition among the youth had adjusted to include the dominant social aspects of their lives within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which for this group of young performers includes *isicathamiya*.

Although tradition is a concept that appears to change and shape itself according to contemporary trends it is impossible to trace all the elements and origins of modern day traditional views. Catherine Cole notes similar problems in her study of Ghana Party Concert Theatre;

concert parties partake in a process of displaced propagation in which historic practices adapt to changing conditions and new locales. The process of transmission follows no clear path or predictable pattern. Old meanings are cast off and new ones adopted with little ceremony or reverence for origins. Even when lines of descent can be clearly traced, origins only tell fragments of a much larger story. (21)

Likewise it is impossible to trace the exact evolution of tradition within *isicathamiya*, from historic influences to modern ones. Although the genre stems from a form of wedding song named *umbuloko*, it also owes its form to both American and European popular singing (Gunner, 2003). Therefore a study of tradition within this popular genre must not be approached simply as an evolutionary study of historic Zulu tradition but also as a study into the appropriation of non-Zulu concepts into modern perceptions of 'Zuluness' as a whole. Erlmann notes this point when tracing the origins of *isicathamiya*;

At the same time, *isicathamiya*, like most other South African music, is a genre in which traces of the American minstrel show, the Methodist hymn, and doo-wop have become the signs of vehicles of a long and irrecoverable entanglement of local performance practice and modern world system (*Africa Civilised, Africa Uncivilized* 179)

It is this ‘irrecoverable entanglement’ that embodies representations of tradition. *Isicathamiya* is a forum through which these entanglements are both communicated and cultivated, shedding new light on perceptions of tradition in early twenty-first century South Africa.

## **2.1 Traditional Stereotypes in the Study of Popular Arts**

South African popular culture finds itself in a conflictual relationship with the commercial entertainment industry. This is particularly true within Zulu culture, an area which is highly publicised and constructed by contemporary entertainment centres through representations of ‘traditional’ Zulu villages and performances. As Jeanne van Eeden argues, “entertainment landscapes have the capacity to effectively obscure true culture” and in doing so seeks to choose “the most obvious stereotypes by which to render other cultures” (18). Coplan highlights the consequence of these traditional stereotypes;

(Tradition’s) outward forms (are) artificially packaged and preserved in national performance ensembles and media programming, while its historically rooted, popular socio-political values and implications are redefined or ignored.” (*Popular Culture and Performance* 6)

From this it becomes clear that in order to undertake a comprehensive study on tradition, aesthetic and visual traditional stereotypes must be discarded and the ‘socio-political values and implications’ given preference. Therefore, this chapter will also focus on the changes within the meanings of *isicathamiya* as well as the strategies employed to communicate them. This, I argue, will result in a truer reflection on the traditional transformations that have taken place within these youths’ perceptions of

tradition.

## 2.2 The Role of Proverbs in Traditional Re-invention

In my conversation with Jan Mbuli, I discussed the attitude of the *isicathamiya* youth towards contemporary music and discourse. Jan acknowledged that genres such as rap, gospel and kwaito all played key influential roles in the writing of many of the *Lover boys* songs. This led me to question whether choirs such as the *Lover boys* challenged older traditional perceptions through the incorporation of new popular music and discourse into their performances. However, as I came to study the genre more closely, I saw that the *isicathamiya* youth were not undermining their established Zulu traditions. Rather, young choirs believe that their performances enrich the culture and contextualise it within the twenty first century. Historic notions of tradition are not abandoned by the youth in the performances, on the contrary a great deal of their content can be traced back into early Zulu history. The use of proverbs and sayings by the youth is one way that old traditions are kept alive within modern contexts. The *Lover boys* make use of these expressions to validate their appeals to the audience:

We are asking you, our people, to build the economy of our country  
*Ngoba ikati lilele eziko kwelase Afrika* (or translated, Because the cat is  
sleeping next to the fireplace in Africa)

The fireplace in this sentence is a cooking area and the cat a representative of an inedible source of meat. Although no Zulu person would be likely to eat a cat (a point which further empowers the saying) it is used to represent times of extreme hunger and poverty. It is a warning of harsh times and serves as a motivation for the Lover

Boy's request, a request to enrich the people (and possibly themselves) financially and defeat poverty. Another young Emkhambathini group, *Nyuswa Home Boys*, use a traditional adage as their opening line to validate their entire performance:

*Ingane engakhali ifela embelekweni* (or translated A child who doesn't cry will die on its mother's back.)

The meaning of this is somewhat straightforward; if one's opinion is not voiced one's problems will not be faced or solved. It is interesting to consider that the constitution of South Africa contains a similar notion in its support of free speech, but *Nyuswa's* use of the proverb suggests their need for the validation of their performance does stem from legal origins. *Nyuswa* are seeking 'traditional' corroboration through the proverb and therefore highlighting the youth's need to exist within a contemporary society that still maintains traditional ideals. The *Nyuswa Home Boys* then move on to scathingly attack South African politicians and question the morality of abortion. At the end of the song *Nyuswa* leaves its audience with a solution to the problems they posed. *Nyuswa* asserts that the people must honour their Zulu tradition which will shelter them from sin and temptation. Catherine Cole theorises that part of the appeal of Concert Theatre was that the audience were able to see performance in the 'language of their everyday lives' (5). Similarly the use of Zulu proverbs and sayings by these youth groups gives the audience a chance to see themes represented, not just in their mother tongue, but in their social-cultural language that would seldom be heard in any other entertainment form. Karin Barber's view of popular arts as "real experience... transformed, articulated and made communicable" (*Popular Arts in Africa*, 38) further validates this observation. It seems that although the *isicathamiya* youth concentrate on present-day issues within their performances they do not hesitate in looking to history for help in these performative expressions. Here, the youth show

that they do not desire to break down older landmarks of tradition; instead they strive to use these landmarks in the creation of a new 'traditional self'. This said, the expressive value of the proverbs cannot be overlooked either; Ruth Finnegan acknowledges the adaptability of proverbs within any time or setting;

Proverbs, finally, are often said to represent a people's philosophy. In proverbs the whole range of human experience can be commented on and analyzed, generalisations and principles expressed in a graphic and concise form, and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind. (416)

Groups such as *Lover boys* and *Nyuswa Home Boys* recognise the power of the proverb and channel this power into their performance. The ability to weave the past into the present without compromising the meaning of the performance is one that *isicathamiya* demonstrates continually, not allowing the past to be erased but instead bringing it into the future. Proverbs are an embodiment of the past, phrases used throughout the ages to express meanings and ideas clearly and fluently. In saying this, the introduction of these proverbs into *isicathamiya* has allowed the choir members a unique link with the past and their traditions. Consequently, these proverbs allow the youth to identify with their past through the sharing of the situations and circumstances that each proverb talks to.

The proverb is a simple yet invaluable source of tradition and history that young groups are tapping into constantly in their quest to find for a identity that defines who they are.

## 2.3 Pasts and Presents

The practice of translating ‘historic’ narratives into contemporary language is further illustrated by Buba and Furniss’ study into the Hausa youth culture of *bandiri*. This study illustrates how the influence of youth on traditional constructs can produce performance that is “current, local and dynamic” (41). Although *bandiri* is based on the ancient practice of Islamic worship, it manages to not only concentrate on the historic texts of the religion but also on everyday discourses, an innovation which allows them to “address the young and set out the basis of the (Islamic) brotherhood in words that they would understand” (31). Buba and Furniss argue that *bandiri* allows the performers a way to convey the intellectual knowledge of Islam by translating the fixed historic text of the Koran into a more accessible form of song and performance.

Like *bandiri*, *isicathamiya* has for many years been engaged in the relation of historical texts through song and performance. Although Zulu ethnicity has historically been focused on orality as a means of communication, there is uncertainty as to whether these oral narratives hold similar value across different class and age groups within Zulu society. An example of this was a performance by *The Ocean Singers* (in May 2004), an older and mature *isicathamiya* group who were singing to a relatively young audience in Emkhambathini. *The Ocean Singers* were formed in 1956 in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. Although the group no longer contains many of the founding members, they retain the themes and styles that characterised *isicathamiya* during the ‘50s and ‘60s. In this song called ‘Nongqawuse’, *The Ocean Singers* concentrated on a historic moment in order to communicate their message.

*Lezomini ezamandulo kukho intombi kaMhlakaza  
Yuthetha izinto ezisimanga  
Kwahlukana abantu*

*Yasuka intombi yaphupha iphupo  
Yabikela abantu  
Yuthi kubo bonke lindelani abazokuvuka emangewabeni  
Kanti ithetha ubuxoki*

*Yasho  
Bulalani izinkomo  
Yasho  
Shisani amasimu  
Linda  
Lindelani abazokuvuka emangewabeni*

*Hhayi uNongqawuze  
Intombi kaMhlakaza  
Yazibulaka izihlobo zethu  
Kwafa amaxhegu kwafa amaxhegukazi  
Kwafa inkomo negusha, kwafa abantwana*

In the past there was a lady of Mhlakaza  
She talked about mysterious things  
People were divided in their opinions of her

She dreamt a dream  
She told the people  
She said, you must prepare yourselves for those who will rise up from the  
graves  
But she was lying

She said  
Kill your livestock  
She said  
Burn your fields  
Wait  
Wait for the people who will rise

Oh Nongqawuse  
The lady of Mhlakaza  
She killed our relatives  
Our grandfathers and grandmothers  
Our cows our sheep and our children  
(Transcribed and translated by Wiseman Masango, VC 14/04)

Although this story was originally part of Xhosa history it has been incorporated into



Zulu knowledge and is still a widely narrated story within Southern African society. Despite this, the audience reaction to *The Ocean Singers* was largely unfavourable. One of the young audience members I interviewed remarked, “they’re too old to sing, they sing only about old things.” Although this comment is a harsh and perhaps unfair criticism of *The Ocean Singers*, it highlights the nature of performance expected by the young Emkhambathini audience. Karin Barber identifies several questions that can help in the identification and analysis of an audience, “how (the audience) come together; how they relate to each other and to the spectacle or utterance they are attending to; what they consider themselves to be part of in doing so; how the spectacle/utterance addresses them.” (1997, 347) In light of these questions it is reasonable to theorise that *The Ocean Singers’* address did not correspond with what the audience “consider themselves to be part of” by attending this *isicathamiya* contest. Contrary to the other performers *The Ocean Singers* did not endeavour to unite the present with the past, instead they chose to narrate the past in an attempt to give meaning to the present. Unlike the *Lover boys* and *Nyuswa*, *The Ocean Singers* chose not to unite contemporary issues with this traditional narrative and in doing so alienated a large portion of their audience who could not relate practically to their performance.

The story of Nongqawuse was also used by English/Zulu writer H.I.E. Dhlomo in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a basis for the creation and innovation of historic traditions. Dhlomo believed this event forced Africans to critically evaluate the value of their traditions within modern society. The story of Nongqawuse was also significant in that it prompted a breakdown in tribal barriers, allowing this Xhosa story to circulate and give meaning in many other African tribes. (Couzens and Visser xi) In spite of

this, the story seemed to hold little currency within the Emkhambathini youth, a thought which suggests that this story too has begun to fade in the face of more contemporary narratives. This was demonstrated by the favourable audience reaction to youth groups that followed *The Ocean Singers*, most sang on present tragedies such as AIDS and crime, tragedies with which each young member of the community could identify with. While *The Ocean Singers* retell a story narrating a tragedy that occurred more than one hundred and fifty years ago, a young group, the *Mighty Q Singers* deal with a present day catastrophe;

*Qaphelani bakithi sufa saphela bakithi isizwe evimnyama*  
*Sibuluwa yisife ekathiwa ingculazi*  
*Sibuluwa yisife iwena umashayabhuge*

People beware, the black nation is dying  
We are dying of the disease called AIDS  
We are dying of the disease called umashayabhuge (the total destroyer)  
(Transcribed and translated by Wiseman Masongo, VC 14/04)

Although there is a constant theme in both songs, namely the death of the black nation, the way each group approaches this issue is distinctly different. The tradition of defining one's present and future through the retelling of the past seems to be falling away and a new tradition of self-definition through the present is emerging. The *Mighty Q Singers* speak of a twenty-first century Nongqawuse, the AIDS virus that is wiping out 'the black nation'. Adopting H.I.E. Dhlomo's interpretation of Nongqawuse, an incident that forced black Southern Africans to change and reassess their traditional values, it becomes clear that AIDS has inflicted a similar blow to traditional beliefs and practices. The virus has contributed to a growing dissociation with the traditional past and an ever-increasing concern over the present and the future. AIDS has awoken new realities within young South Africans, realities that need to be communicated and debated within the popular arts. Just as Dhlomo

believed that the tragedy of Nongqawuse forced African tribal culture to adapt to western influences, AIDS has forced the youth to adapt the genre of *isicathamiya* to communicate this present day tragedy with contemporary examples. Dhlomo's idea of 'cultural renewal' is embodied by this cyclic regeneration of cultural norms, although Nongqawuse was able to communicate a message to past generations it no longer speaks to youths who are held captive by extremely different dangers and fears. This distance between traditional historic identities and contemporary life is being realised by *isicathamiya* performers who make these boundaries clear and apparent; as illustrated through this *Lover boys* song;

*Kulunyaka sikhungethwe izinhlopheko  
Babengconu ababamkhulu kabephila ngemfuye yabo  
Isikathi asisavumi ukuba siphile ngemfuyo*

In these times we are faced with sadness  
Our grandfathers were better off because they relied on their livestock  
These times do not allow us to do this  
(Transcribed and translated by Wiseman Masango, VC 14/04)

An application of Togeir Fjeld's argument of tradition as invention (set out earlier in this chapter) would suggest that social dynamics are changing within the *isicathamiya* community, old associations with the past have lost meaning and no longer provide the pool of knowledge and experience that they once did. Tradition is evolving according to a new and more challenging present, the constant repeating by the *Lover boys* of the phrase 'these times' giving testimony to this observation. Much like the *bandiri* performers of Nigeria, *isicathamiya* groups are involved in the complex activity of re-defining tradition through the 'dis-appropriation' of historic cultural practices, replacing them with newer, more accessible methods of performance.

## 2.4 Traditional Movement Re-invented

Words are not the bases for representations of tradition. *Isicathamiya*'s encompassment of dance, dress and song also allow for different sites of traditional symbolism. Jan reaffirmed that *isicathamiya* is divided into three sections, dance, dress and narrative content, each one of these aspects being as equally important as the other. Erlmann's studies of dance within *isicathamiya* as a mode of "self-constitution" (*Nightsong* 187) suggest that performers escape the effects of 'the colonial gaze' by redefining themselves through the body. Although this observation may ring true, especially within a system as oppressive as apartheid, it is also important to note that *isicathamiya* and its meaning cannot be viewed solely as a response to repressive political conditions. Catherine Cole observes a similar notion in her Ghana Party Concert Theatre study:

Concert trios were indeed subversive of colonial ideologies, but their subversions were indirect, realised by means of performance rather than explicitly stated in narratives, dialogue, and dramatic structure. (123)

Cole reminds her readers that the meanings we extract from *isicathamiya* must be the result of an equal mix of colonial and traditional ideologies, as well historic and modern influences. Joseph Shabalala confirms this when he attributes the soft stepping movements of *isicathamiya* to hostel living conditions. Shabalala states that urban black workers insisted that migrants from rural areas did not practice their traditional dances as these were too loud and caused disturbance within their living quarters. Subsequently, *isicathamiya*'s characteristically calm movements can find origin not only within resistance to colonial ideologies but also within resistance to historic culture by black workers themselves. (*MBUBE: The Night of the Lion*)

Movement is a contested space as, on one hand, it is partly defined by the narrative text of each song, but on the other it brings its own meaning and interpretation to the performance as a whole. Erlmann states that dance and speech, “while not being completely independent of each other, cannot be translated into each other.” (*Nightsong* 188) Dance itself holds an important position within Zulu culture, playing an integral part in many central practices of Zulu communities such as spiritual worship and celebration. Erlmann draws links from historically traditional forms of dance to *isicathamiya*, attributing the single file positioning of *isicathamiya* singers to *ikhetho*, a form of wedding dance in which the bridegroom’s party confronts the bride’s party through a dance in a single straight line. Another influential dance is *isigekle*, an expression of ancestral identity. This dance is typified by fast stamping movements intersected by ‘slow-paced’ intervals. Erlmann also draws connections between the more modern form of *ukureka* (or ragtime) and *isicathamiya*, noting the similarities of *ukureka*’s “simple walking steps in time to the song” walking *isicathamiya* soft stepping actions. (1995, 189)

The hybrid nature of movement in *isicathamiya* is apparent in the above observations. Here the boundaries of tradition are blurred with modern influences and ideas. From the viewpoint of colonial ideologies *isicathamiya* moves away from the seemingly ‘grotesque’ and ‘uncontrolled’ movement that so amazed colonial explorers such as Moffat and Livingstone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was dismissed as animal like and ‘uncivilised’. The body within *isicathamiya* however cannot be seen as appropriating to “the imperial narratives of proper colonial identity (for African subjects)” (De Kock 36) set out by these missionaries as it takes a unique form, not bound by

colonial stereotypes. This suggests something more complex in the making of these movements and of the body itself.

As I mentioned above, Erlmann argues that the bodies of Zulu migrant labourers were subjected to conditions different to those of their rural origins. The bodily movements of rural Zulus was seen as inappropriate and was not tolerated by urbanised black workers (*MBUBE: The Night of the Lion*). The collapse of the historic Zulu body forced rural workers to appropriate a new traditional identity, salvaging parts of their own rural traditions while incorporating urban bodily identities through genres such as *ukureka*. This identity enabled the black migrant to place himself within the urban space while not completely succumbing to it. The Emkhambathini youth have taken this identity, and I argue, are *de-urbanising* the body of the *isicathamiya* performer through devices such as louder stamping of the feet and high kicking reminiscent of ingoma dances. It is the removal of *isicathamiya* from urban spaces and back into rural communities that allows the youth to take back a section of their historical traditional roots. This illustrates that the youth are not solely involved in the re-invention of traditional practices but also in the reclaiming of decommissioned customs that were cast aside by urbanised migrant labourers. Imogen Gunner asserts that a 'combination of creative innovation and traditional elements' allows choirs to be individual while remaining within the boundaries of tradition (26); reinforcing the notion that these youth choirs wish to stretch the boundary of tradition itself rather than step outside it. Jan himself raised this point when he compared *isicathamiya* to R&B and kwaito, genres that have evolved and changed from earlier music styles through a variation of 'form and rhythm'. The youth seem happier to change and shape 'traditional' genres rather create a different music style outside of traditional

constructs.

Each song also carries a section called *i-step*, where the crux narrative of the song is repeated continually while the group engages in their own routine of dancing. *I-step* allows members of the group other than the leader a chance to step forward and engage in a unique choreography separate to that of the main group. It is this space within *isicathamiya* performances that truly illustrates Karin Barber's notion of 'infinite elasticity' within the popular African arts (*Popular Arts in Africa* 5) because it allows the youth to reclaim their historical roots without compromising the basic elements of *isicathamiya*. It is within this space of *i-step* that historical dance genres are recreated and incorporated into *isicathamiya*. Although these performers are resurrecting old structures of performance they are bringing *isicathamiya* into a new relationship with the traditional body, allowing it to exist within a new context, namely the body of the post-apartheid youth.

## 2.5 Going Against the Dress Code

Dress and costume in *isicathamiya* is perhaps the most obvious departure from historic traditional roots. Erlmann cites western and colonial capitalist ideologies as a big factor in determining the roots of *isicathamiya's* dress code (*Nightsong* 201 – 202), a fair assumption given the capital and urban environment in *isicathamiya* was formed. The influence of American black musicians (such as minstrel singers) on the appearance of *isicathamiya* performers is obvious in their formal suit clad appearances. These urban identities, unlike those within the movement of the body, are almost generically adopted by the youth of Emkhambathini. The reason for this, I

argue, is specifically rooted in the need for new traditional identities. Although the young performers re-appropriate historic bodily movements into their songs they choose to remain separated from these historic identities through dress and appearance. Dress in *isicathamiya* acts as a distinguishing barrier that gives identity to its performers. Performers clad in suits and white gloves are distinguishable as *isicathamiya* performers within their towns and communities. In terms of tradition it strengthens the notion of a reinvention, the discarding of 'cultural' dress in favour of a new space and identity. Although other groups such as *Ladysmith Black Mambazo* have opted for more 'African' styles of appearance, the youth seem adamant in wishing to adhere to the formalised (and probably more costly) nature of *isicathamiya* dress. Earlier in this chapter, I dealt with the concept of 'westernised' and 'artificially packaged' African tradition through social theorist David Coplan's work on popular culture. Although *Black Mambazo's* dress might be seen as more symbolic of their traditional heritage, these forms of African identity have become westernised and commercialised through the widespread capitalist exploitation of Africans. The formal dress signifies *isicathamiya* choirs as distanced from these 'manufactured' forms of tradition that serve to stereotype and package Africans into one identity. In this sense the suits and ties arguably portray a more accurate representation of identity in rural communities such as Emkhambathini.

## **2.6 Multilayered Tradition**

In the introductory chapter to Veit Erlmann's *Nightsong*, Joseph Shabalala highlights Zulu tradition as a multilayered concept, encompassing many different groups and contexts.



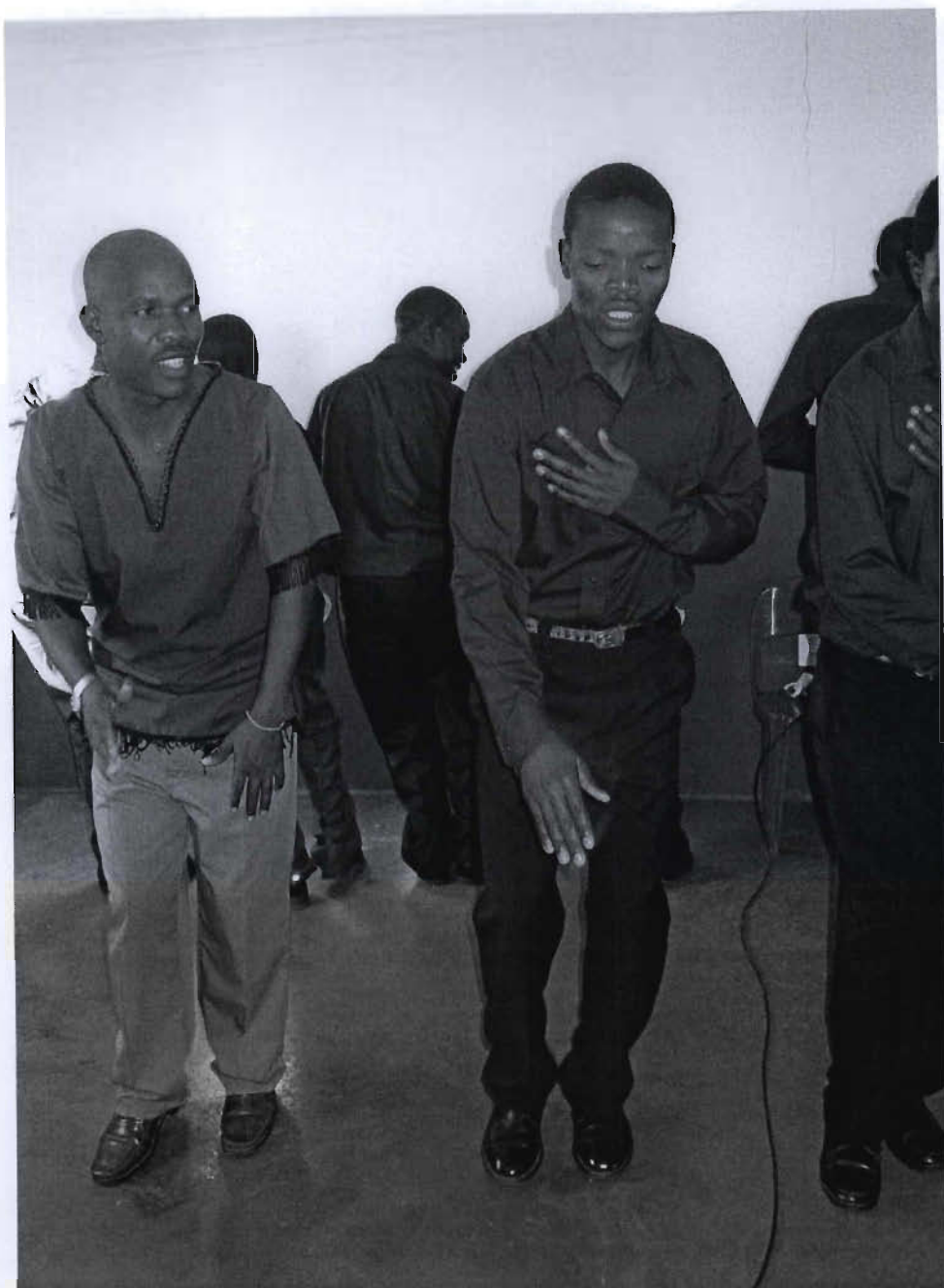
In our culture every occasion has its own music. We have music done this way; someone calls, others respond, there is music sung during war times. Each age group has its own music and/or war cry. (Nightsong 8)

The *isicathamiya* youth subscribe to this concept in that it seems they are redefining tradition within their own ‘occasion’ and age group. Their narratives and performative style remain almost exclusively within the discourse of these youth performers. As the above example illustrate, groups such as *The Ocean Singers* continue their style of performance even when performing to an audience largely made up younger members. This multilayered perception of tradition allows the *isicathamiya* youth to create their own space within it, a space that allows them to redefine their traditional practices away from other bases of Zulu tradition while still keeping within the legitimate confines of Zulu culture. Karin Barber places emphasis on popular African arts as between the ‘formal institutions’ of the traditional and elite, a concept that waivers particularly within the genre of *isicathamiya*. *Isicathamiya*, I argue, finds itself within tradition, not between it. The conception of tradition as fixed in historical moments has led popular African arts to be excluded from its confines and analysed as a unique category in itself. Barber, in her early work on popular culture, claims that “popular arts are seen as a hybrid, distinguishable from traditional arts by their syncretism” (*Popular Arts in Africa* 10), but her theory falls short as she fails to analyse ‘traditional arts’ in terms of *their* hybridity and syncretism. *The Ocean Singers* recital of Nongqawuse is an example of Zulu tradition incorporating Xhosa history to become a shared narrative within the greater black nation. If one were to dig deeper into Zulu culture one would find Shaka, who, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century incorporated his views of war and discipline into Zulu traditional thinking and transformed the Zulus into a warrior nation. Shaka reshaped the traditional meanings

of war, discipline and control in a community that had never achieved great military conquest. Although Barber acknowledges that tradition is not represented only by a “static, closed, consensual village community” (1987, 10) she fails to explore the traditional as she explores the popular, through its syncretic and hybrid roots that have changed over time and allowed Zulu culture to maintain meaning within modern day society.

## 2.7 Summary

Traditional re-invention is rife within the performances of *isicathamiya* youth choirs. Throughout this chapter I touched on how these choirs reshape and transform traditional practices in order to place them within an accessible range to both themselves and their audience. Despite this re-invention, it is imperative to note that these choirs do not discard their past traditional practices, they merely re-shape and restructure these practices, creating a contemporary space within historical tradition. Most importantly however, this chapter has revealed that the *isicathamiya* youth are not content to give up their traditional ways. A unique relationship between past and present has arisen where traditional ideas are adapted and used for the benefit of contemporary Zulu youth.



Leader of the *Mighty Q Singers*, Innocent Hlongwane (front left) directs the *i-step* during a competition in Emkhambathini (February 2003)

### Chapter 3: Stretching the Boundary

Although *isicathamiya* was born out of migrant labour, it itself gave the performers the power to speak and be heard under the harsh political conditions of the pre-1994 South Africa. With the introduction of democracy into South Africa in 1994 *isicathamiya* has shifted its focus from an exclusively migrant world to include a community-based living space. With this significant shift in focus *isicathamiya* has been forced to adopt new subjects and new strategies to communicate effectively to its audience. The notion of ‘stretching the boundary’ is important in the genre of *isicathamiya*. Rather than break the rules set out by this type of performance, performers exercise the individual freedom allowed to them within *isicathamiya*. The ability to express individual ideas and still remain within the boundaries of the genre is perhaps best explained by Joseph Shabalala through a saying widely known within Zulu culture, “If we’re dancing together in one line, and you want to jump out in front, then do so, but come back and join with us” (Ballantine, 249). This saying suggests that although individual freedom and expression is encouraged, performers must return to the core values that have defined *isicathamiya* for almost a century. In this chapter I intend to show how the youth of Emkhambathini have stretched the boundaries of *isicathamiya*, not only changing the genre but adding to it, encompassing new identities into their songs and performances. Karin Barber argues that African Popular Culture exists in a state of “infinite elasticity” (1987, 5), and it is a state, I will argue, that allows the genre to shape and grow according to its site and situation within society. Imogen Gunner argues in her study that “*isicathamiya* is truly reflective of the lives of its practioners” (2003, 28), while still managing to remain within the boundaries of the genre. In this chapter I will discuss my argument over a

number of sections. Within the first three sections I will be referring to one main text, a performance by the *Mkhambathini Try Singers*, which deals with the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy in the United States;

*Yaze yankulu lendaba  
Lalelani sinixoxele  
Eyenzele eMelika  
Kuye kwafa abantu  
Ngamabilidi Ama Twin Towers  
Lawo mabhilidi ayewiswa amabhanoyi  
Lawo amabhanoyi ayeqhamuka ePakistaani<sup>5</sup>*

There is a terrible story  
That we must tell you about  
It happened in America  
People were killed, people were killed  
By large buildings called the Twin Towers  
The planes that caused the collapse of these buildings  
Were from Pakistan.

It was a real tragedy  
Both parents and children were killed.

We pledge with you  
Leaders of the nation  
To bring an end to the violence  
That is so evident throughout the world.

What happened in America  
May perpetrate violence.  
Americans please we beg you  
Do not take revenge.

The people that died in America  
Died because of Bin Laden.

Oh Bin Laden you've created havoc.  
Let's sit around the table  
To discuss the terrible circumstances  
Besetting America.

Ah! What are we to do about  
The bitter event that occurred in America?

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<sup>5</sup> Regrettably the rest of the original Zulu text was unavailable

Americans were wiped out.  
The people of America were wiped out  
(Translated by Dolly Simelane, cited in Imogen Gunner 52)

Although this text will not be the only primary material I will refer to within these sections, it forms a basis for much of my discussion and practical illustration. This version of the song was transcribed during January 2003 when the *Mkhambathini Try Singers* gave a performance for team members of the NRF funded project 'Performance, Meaning and Identity' at a community hall in the Emkhambathini area. The *Mkhambathini Try Singers* have since disbanded but the song is still performed today by *The Table Mountain Messengers*, a group containing many of the original *Try Singers* members. Although the content of this song may seem outdated (namely the plea for no retaliatory action), its continued performance suggests it holds a special meaning for both the audience and the performers in Emkhambathini.

### 3.1 Leaving Home

*Isicathamiya* has for a long time been associated with the concept of the 'home' and the notion of 'homecoming'. Migrant labourers have, since the conception of the genre, drawn their power and identity from their place of origin (or homeland). An example of this can be seen in an *Uxolo Home Boys* song, performed at a COSATU funded competition in Pinetown, 1991;

We entered the hall and it became hotter!  
Because of Ubuhle Bemolweni  
The beauty of our home Molweni!

Now that we have arrived,  
Everything is starting to happen

Just walk easy Ubuhle Bemolweni  
And be famous throughout the world!  
(COSATU *Isicathamiya* competition. University of Natal Culture and  
Working Life Project, Video. 1991)<sup>6</sup>

Here the *Uxolo Home Boys* draw their fiery poise from the image of their homeland, Molweni. *Uxolo Home Boys* see themselves as empowered by the landscape itself, praising their homeland's beauty and wishing fame upon it throughout the world. This suggests that groups such as *Uxolo Home Boys*, groups performing in the contested political space of the early nineties, looked from their space in society toward the space of the home. Erlmann argues that, "to sing *isicathamiya* is to be at home", he also stresses that it is a genre performed by people who are, "both figuratively and in real terms – homebound" (*Nightsong* 133). It is obvious that the site of the home or the 'homeland' forms an integral part of the foundation on which pre-1994 *isicathamiya* choirs were built.

However, the *Mkhambathini Try Singers'* September 11<sup>th</sup> song suggests that this notion has changed in post-apartheid South Africa. The relocation of *isicathamiya* from the space of the 'exiled migrant' to a community based setting has caused a shift in focus among young *isicathamiya* groups. Instead of looking from outside the homeland, towards it, the *Mkhambathini Try Singers* appear to be looking from within the homeland, away from it. This, I argue, suggests that the notion of 'homesickness' that so embodied *isicathamiya* during the apartheid years no longer forms an integral part within the young, community based *isicathamiya* choirs. The *Mkhambathini Try Singers* draw power from their ability to engage with the world outside of their immediate community. Instead of emphasising a wish to glorify their

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<sup>6</sup> The original Zulu text for this song was not available

homeland to the world, the *Try Singers* attempt to integrate themselves into the world community. Their authority is not demonstrated in the sensory images that the *Uxolo Home Boys* express (such as “it became hotter”), but through other devices such as the ability to offer advice and guidance to a world power such as the United States;

Let's sit around the table  
To discuss the terrible circumstances  
Besetting America.

This shift suggests that the *Try Singers* no longer focus on empowering the homeland through praise and tribute, the September 11<sup>th</sup> song makes no mention of the group's area or community of origin. Instead, as illustrated in the above extract, the *Try Singers* gain stature and power from the bridging of their ‘personal’ space with other international landscapes, a notion which helps create the sense of a world community. Much like the *Uxolo Home Boys’* song attempted to create a space for Molweni, even outside the borders of its landscape, the *Try Singers* create a space for ‘America’ within their personal landscape, interacting with the American people as if geographical borders and boundaries do not exist, addressing the American people and leaders of other foreign nations in their call for peace. This idea of a ‘personal’ landscape does not mean that the homeland holds no function in the formation of identity within these young *isicathamiya* singers. The *Uxolo Home Boys’* song demonstrates how performers embody their homeland, how they represent their landscape of origin through their songs and performances. Although the landscape presented within the *Try Singers’* song is not the homeland, it still acts to empower the performer and the audience through a sense of proximity to important global events. This sense of proximity can then transfer to the homeland and act to place it within a more influential, global space, a space that will allow other performers within



that homeland to engage with issues outside of their communities.

Although a shift in focus has occurred, *isicathamiya* still retains its power and identity through notions of site and landscape. The vast expanse of the global community has stretched the boundary of landscape in *isicathamiya* to encompass the global community. Although this seems initially to be a colossal change in the mind frame of *isicathamiya* performers, it is essentially based on the same notion that founded the genre over seventy years ago, namely the bridging between landscapes, between home and the outside world.

### 3.2 Changing Audiences

The question of audience is also a key issue in the shift from issues of the homeland to global concerns. After the *Try Singers*' performance in January 2003, researcher Imogen Gunner interviewed two young members of the audience, Mbalenhle and Thabile. Thabile outlined the importance of the *Try Singers* performance to the youth at large;

I feel that the first song was important to the youth, and it meant that the youth, the people that were singing were actually concerned about global issues, not just issues that affect the community. This was quite important and something that I feel the youth should be focusing on and I feel that they are quite intelligent to be thinking that far ahead, not just immediate things, but things that affect people abroad as well. (Translated by Dolly Simelane, Cited in Imogen Gunner, 42 – 43)

Thabile's comments highlight the changing nature of *isicathamiya* audiences. Once made up of displaced working black South Africans, the movement of the genre towards the homeland has generated an audience with different needs and interests.

Karin Barber relates transformation in audience to “changes in the institutionalisation and economics of entertainment” (*Preliminary Notes on Audeinces* 347), an argument that prompts us to look not only at *isicathamiya* but also at other forms of entertainment that are accessible to Emkhambathini’s youth audience. Simon Stephens’ study of *kwaito* music holds a possible answer to the drastic changes that have manifested *isicathamiya* audiences over the past ten years. Stephens cites the increased availability of popular music in post-apartheid South Africa as a major influence in the South African music industry:

The ending of boycotts, levies, and duties on goods entering South Africa has tempered the cost of radios and CD hi-fi systems. An increase in the reception of popular music has been met by a rise in music’s mediation and production, and this has brought black South Africans more in touch with contemporary international cultures. (257)

This ‘increase in reception’ of international popular music has arguably contributed to audiences’ demands for more global content within genres such as *isicathamiya*, as well as pushing *isicathamiya* into competition with both local and overseas musicians. Although this can only encourage new forms of style and creativity it also holds a worrying possibility. While researching the black Johannesburg entertainment scene in the 1970s, David Coplan noted that Black South Africans had begun to “measure the worth of their cultural achievements against their conception of Black American critical standards” ( 193). Continued audience exposure to international popular music could result in a similar problem within the genre of *isicathamiya*. As Thabile’s comments illustrate, *isicathamiya* choirs are already judged by some listeners on the inclusion (or exclusion) of global issues, and on the presence of international content. As the apartheid government disabled cultural communication in the 1970s, forcing black audiences to evaluate entertainment within foreign ‘critical standards’, the post-

apartheid influx of popular international music has allowed audiences to supplement their critical standards from the more widely accessible foreign music forms that are available over media formats such as radio and television.

Drawing from the Barber argument mentioned earlier in this section, these conventional changes within communities such as Emkhambathini have affected the transformation of audiences throughout South Africa. The principles of popular performance have changed, and, as a result of these changes, it now has a new audience eager to see their conceptions of popular entertainment voiced and accommodated. Although the aesthetic tastes of the audience have shifted with the introduction and progression of large scale international popular music, the function of *isicathamiya* remains largely the same to this new and younger audience as it was to those who watched it during apartheid years. This seems to suggest that *isicathamiya* holds not only aesthetic appeal to its audience but also serves as a cultural flagship, placing and defining the audience according to their performance. For this reason it is pivotal that choirs attempt to create conditions and identities concurrent with those the audience find important and acceptable within their own thoughts and experiences. However, as Barber asserts, popular performances cannot be seen as 'self-contained packages of meaning', waiting to be 'unwrapped' by the audience members (*Popular Arts in Africa*, 58). It is up to the audience to accept and integrate these meanings into their experiences, meaning each audience member's interpretation might be slightly different to the next one's. It is these differing interpretations and meanings that allow *isicathamiya* to evolve into the twenty-first century, accommodating new audiences while still managing to keep the older ones content.

### 3.3 Popular Memory

Popular memory plays in an integral part in *isicathamiya* performances. Performers often invoke historical situations or past occurrences in their songs, giving their own account of events as they saw them. In a sense, *isicathamiya* has always played a role in the recitation and creation of popular memories within the communities they perform. Johnson and Dawson define ‘popular memory’ as “the social production of memory... (a process in which) everyone participates...everyone, in this sense is a historian” (76). The *Mkambathini Try Singers* recited their account of the outbreak of violence in the areas surrounding Richmond during the nineties in their song ‘The Battle of Richmond’. The song was performed in April 2003 at a competition in Emkhambathini;

*Siyabuza*

*Siyabuza siyababaza baphela abantu, eRichmond*

*Begedana ngezibhamu*

*Beshiselana newizi*

*Thina sibonile*

*Sibonile thina sonke lulu sizi*

*Abantu bedutshulwa ubusuka nemini kwelase Richmond*

*Igazi*

*Lona ligobhoza kuhle komfula ungenisa*

*Siya*

*Siyakhala ngalezenzo jase Richmond*

*Abantu befa ubugingqigingqi kanti fathi asisibonanga leso sizathu*

*Thina sikhuluma nje*

*Wonke amaqhawe akithi allele phansi kwezidindi*

*Ngenxa yalezi pimpi zase Richmond*

*Siyacela isizathu*

*Siyacela isizathu esenza lowo monakalo*

*Nkosi siyayi nxusela leyo mphefumulo  
Eyaphuma ngempi yase Richmond*

We ask  
People are destroyed  
They are being killed with guns  
They burn each other's homes

We saw  
We saw all this suffering  
People being shot  
Day and night at Richmond

Blood was flowing  
In the rivers

We are crying  
Because of the those deeds of Richmond  
People dying like flies  
And we don't even see the reason  
As we speak, some  
Sleep under the grass  
Because of the battle of Richmond

We ask for the reasons  
For this destruction

Lord, we beg for the souls  
That left their bodies in the battle of Richmond...  
(Translated by Nkosinathi Sithole, transcribed by Wiseman Masango, VC  
5/03)

Richmond was under a reign terror from warlord Sifiso Nkabinde (An ANC provincial deputy secretary who was also a member of the United Democratic Front) from the early 1990s. Nkabinde was allegedly a double agent apartheid spy who received protection from the ANC in order to avoid the potentially catastrophic consequences that would result for the ANC if Nkabinde was exposed (*How ANC protected warlord 'spy'*). Nkabinde was eventually expelled from the ANC in 1997 and waged a bloody war against ANC members in the Richmond region where he was later killed in 1999, facing over 18 counts of murder (*Magistrate wants Ngcuka in*

court). Here the *Mkambathini Try Singers* integrate their personal history with the broader popular knowledge of the violence in Richmond. Johnson and Dawson identify memory “as a term which directs our attention not (to) the past but to *the past-present relation*” (78), the *Mkambathini Try Singers* draw clear relations from their past experience in Richmond to the present killings in the area, using their own experiences to validate their other observations. It is this emphasis over the ‘past-present relation’ within Emkhambathini youth choirs, I will argue, that have allowed them a new site of power and authority within their songs. The *Ocean Singers*’ performance of the popular historical narrative of ‘Nonqawuse’ (printed and discussed above) is recitation of a much repeated popular historical narrative; the *Ocean Singers* themselves do have some authority over the narrative in that it is *their* interpretation of a much popularised event in history. The event, however has passed, and cannot be re-witnessed nor validated through the present, it only exists within narratives such as the *Ocean Singers*’ performance. the *Mkambathini Try Singers*, however are re-defining the sense of popular memory presented to audiences through bridging notions of time and space, allowing the present to become memory and defining history as both something within the space of the past and the present. Instead of a historical narrative, like the *Ocean Singers*’ ‘Nonqawuse’, the *Mkambathini Try Singers* performance allows the audience to look forward, while at the same time, look back at the history of the event. This allows the integration of not only important historical events into popular memory but also current and occurring events, events that have a past and a continuing present. Most importantly, it allows the *isicathamiya* choir performing the song to place themselves within historical narratives, giving them authority over the past and the present. Although this is not a strategy exclusively used by youth choirs, the lack of purely historical narratives in

*isicathamiya* youth performances suggest that this technique holds a greater position within young *isicathamiya* choirs. Coplan alludes to the popular arts as “a continuous response to social experience: with attempts to define, mediate, incorporate, and ultimately control reality through a process of representation based on common interests and interpretations” (*Popular Culture and Performance* 2). Drawing on this notion it becomes apparent that the bridging of past and present allows these young choirs to ‘control reality’ more effectively, validating their messages by existing both in the past and the present. History, as Erlmann states, “is above all a matter of consciousness, of agency” (*Nightsong* 135) and therefore can be changed and manipulated to achieve a desired purpose or effect.

The notion of bridging the historical past and the present is, I argue, in part the result of increasing frustration from the youth over the continued repetition of ‘ancient’ popular memory. Competing in the same competition as the *Mkambathini Try Singers*, the *Thulubheke Singers* performed a song that casts doubt over the most revered Zulu icon in history;

*Vuka Shaka emathuneni  
Baphelil’ abantu bakho  
Vuk’u uzobusa emhlabeni  
Wafa kabi cvena Shaka  
Waf’ unpavikampa*

*Wen’ana Sandlwan’ unesizindaba  
Zamaqhawe akwa Zulu  
Alele amaqhawe  
Alele amaqhaw’ akithi  
Alel’ eSandlwane*

*Alele wema  
Alele amaqhawe*

Shaka, rise from the grave  
Your people are destroyed  
Rise to rule the earth  
You died badly you Shaka  
You died without protecting yourself

You Sandlwane you have news  
Of the heroes of Zululand  
The heroes are dead  
Our heroes are dead  
They died at Sandlwane

They are dead Oh mother  
The heroes are dead  
At Sandlwane the heroes are dead

(Translated by Nkosinathi Sithole, transcribed by Wiseman Masango VC 5/03)

The critical tone of this particular song highlights a growing dissatisfaction among young performers in the continued narration of ‘ancient’ historical narratives. Historical reverence towards Shaka is questioned in the speaker’s criticism of his lack of foresight, a criticism which juxtaposes the preceding line which suggests Shaka should ‘rule the earth’. The ‘heroes of Sandlwane’ (or Isandlwana where, in the mid-nineteenth century, Zulu forces won a famous victory over the British army) are continually referred to as ‘dead’, emphasising their mortality and creating a sense of discontinuation to an event that has almost become a legend in Zulu society. This song, above all, highlights the changing notion of popular memory within the *isicathamiya* youth. Instead of the constant repetition of historical narratives, narratives that formed the basic foundations for Zulu popular memory, youth groups are seeking an ever-changing narration of the present-past, a past that is still evolving and developing, a past that is carrying into the present. The *Mkhambathini Try Singers*’ September 11<sup>th</sup> song illustrates this point clearly. This tragedy, although situated in historical popular memory, is engaged with by the *Try Singers* in the present.



What happened in America  
May perpetrate violence.  
Americans please we beg you  
Do not take revenge.

The historical memory presented here, 'What happened in America', is engaged with through a present warning and a threat of future violence, popular historical memory is brought into the present through this performance. The *Try Singers* embody this changing notion of popular memory through this song, allowing the audience to engage with a history while at the same time focusing on the present.

The reason for the youths' resistance to 'ancient' historical narratives could lie close to the institution of a developed education and communication system in post-apartheid South Africa. Separation from 'literate structures' such as adequate schooling can result in a largely 'oral' culture that cannot transcribe their history through writing and recording. Walter Ong observes strategies used for the retention of knowledge within oral societies;

Since in primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. (41)

During apartheid, few of the migrant labourers that made up *isicathamiya* had access to formal schooling in their native rural areas. Therefore the preservation of historical and traditional knowledge was only possible through continued repetition and performance of the histories; the *Ocean Singers'* performance highlighted above is one example of historical knowledge being directed communicated through *isicathamiya*. In fact many genres within Zulu culture enable historical reference,

*izibongo* (praise poetry) and *izigiyo* (war dances) (Gunner and Gwala 1) are but few examples of performance medium that allow history to be communicated. In post-apartheid South Africa most young *isicathamiya* choirs are made up of high school learners or graduates, all of whom are fully literate. To these young performers knowledge does not need to be repeated in order for it to remain in existence, instead knowledge can be transcribed and accessed at will when it is needed. Hence, instead of preserving these popular memories, young *isicathamiya* choirs have started to reinvent the notion of Zulu popular memory, constantly changing and configuring it towards the present.

### **3.4 Women**

In this section, I will discuss the role of women in *isicathamiya*, firstly in the light of women as performers and secondly under the rubric of women as subjects of *isicathamiya* performance. Through these discussions I will attempt to show how attitudes towards women have changed with the re-location of *isicathamiya* from dislocated urban settings to community based sites.

#### **3.4.1 Women Performers**

Traditionally *isicathamiya* was a genre exclusively performed by men and the inclusion of women performers within the genre was unheard of until recently. Although the reasons for this exclusion can be variously explained, a study of migrant attitudes towards women shed some light on why *isicathamiya* performances remained exclusively male during its years as a migrant genre. Firstly, migrants were

able to transfer the sexual functions of women onto 'wives', young migrants that served as sexual partners for older workers and were treated like women by these 'husbands'. These 'wives' often received money and gifts in return for their partnership with these older workers. Secondly, although women were often available in the nearby urban areas, these women were seen as no more than unhealthy distractions, capable of robbing one's "rural identity" (Moodie 243). These women were only encountered outside of the hostels and living areas of the migrants and were never admitted inside these areas. The legal wives of these migrants, often referred to as 'country wives', were also not admitted to these hostels and were forced to stay either on a nearby rural homestead or boarding establishment if they wished to be near their husbands (Moodie 229 – 254).

This gender based segregation within migrant culture did not allow women to play a formative role within the performance of *isicathamiya* until the 1990s. It is important to note however that women were not excluded from all performances, on the contrary they played (and still continue to play) an important part in 'traditional' song and dances. Zulu culture does not segregate women from performance, rather it tends to divide performance between genders, allowing for men and women to take part in simultaneous, yet differing performance practices. Deborah James' study of North Sotho migrant women highlights women's adoption of performance practices such as *Kiba* (a Sotho performance genre). These performances were popular among audiences in towns and urban areas, allowing female performers to construct their own specific migrant identity, giving them "status in equivalence with men within a male dominated world" (17). Women's role in *isicathamiya* has, in the past taken the form of 'ancillary' functions, 'heroizing' the performers through a series of gestures,

and even by way of tokens and gifts (Erlmann 1996, 162). Erlmann does make mention of one choir, *Alison Gumbi's Easy Walkers*, who, in the time around his *Nightsong* publication, started to incorporate women performers within their choirs; this however was extremely uncommon within migrant circles, a fact owing perhaps to the relations migrant men held with women that are set out above (*Nightsong* 163).

During an interview in May 2004 with Jan Mbuli, a member of the *Lover boys isicathamiya* choir, I brought up the issue of women performers within the genre. Jan maintained that anyone was welcome to perform on stage, women included. This open attitude towards inter-gender *isicathamiya* performances was showcased during memorial service in Elandskop during March 2004, where, the *Mafunze Black Singers* performed with one woman member in their choir. During an interview later that day the woman, Thandoluhle Zulu, said she was the only female *isicathamiya* performer she knew of, yet she experienced no feelings of segregation or dissociation within the group or the genre as a whole. Thandoluhle viewed the group as a disciplined structure, a site that can offer a stable and safe space in a chaotic society hampered by violence, unemployment and AIDS. Deborah James alludes to how performance provides not only an identity to its practitioners but also support and assistance within their communities (8), notions that are supported in Thandoluhle's comments. The group dynamics within *isicathamiya* provide shelter and cohesion to youths who would otherwise have little to occupy themselves with. The inclusion of women in *isicathamiya* allows them to occupy new spaces in society, Erlmann states that many traditional women's performances such as Zulu women's bow songs, involve the women positioning herself in accordance to her husband or lover, expressing feelings of sadness and longing (*Nightsong* 164). Women's inclusion in *isicathamiya* however,



will allow them agency to express meanings and concerns not directly related to gendered roles in society, *isicathamiya* performances will allow women to occupy positions in society that grant them social and cultural hierarchy, allowing them a say in the construction and verbalisation of important social conditions.

### 3.4.2 Women as ‘subjects’ of performance

In his study on *isicathamiya*, Erlmann recognises the subject of women as a hotbed of negative connotations. Migrant *isicathamiya* performers “perceived the threat to the moral foundations of the homestead economy...through the growing independence of young men and women” (Erlmann, *Nightsong* 162). An example of this can be seen in this song by the *New Home Brothers*;

*Shanelani amabala wezingane  
Nanguya nje umakoti uzongena nemikhuba emibi  
Wamuhle umakoti, wamuhle usafika  
Uyothi angajwayela akhahlele indoda  
Lomakoti akahloniphi, ufaka amabhulukwe  
Ayi isimodeli sibi madoda  
Thina nabafowethu sasithandana wafika wasixabanisa*

Sweep the yard children  
Here comes the bride with bad manners  
You are beautiful, bride, upon your arrival  
Once she has familiarized herself with the place, she will kick her husband  
The bride lacks respect, she puts on trousers  
Oh, the modern times are bad, gentlemen  
We got on well with our brothers until she came and we started quarrelling  
(Cited Erlmann, *Nightsong* 161 – 162)

In this song, the woman is seen within a patriarchal morality system that does not allow equal relationships between a man and a woman. The woman is not allowed to ‘put on trousers’, or in other words take on a man’s role within the house.

Surprisingly, although South African society has granted equal status to women the young *isicathamiya* performers still seem to hold on to old patriarchal attitudes. Although their criticisms are not as harsh, they still reject the notion of ‘women with trousers’. The *Real Peace Boys* demonstrated this continuing attitude with the performance of a this song during a 2003 competition in Emkhambathini;

My princess do not hate me  
If I am a sinner  
I only have you to thank my princess

Despite the promise that I made to you  
I think that I should break up with you  
Because we don’t see eye to eye  
I’ll be on my way

You and I no longer get along  
Whenever we argue  
You tell me that you are the boss  
In this house  
(Translated by Dolly Simelane)<sup>7</sup>

This song recognises the fears of the *New Home Brothers* in the description of a woman who exerts authority around the household. Although the song is toned more respectfully, embodied in terms such as ‘my princess’, it still refuses the woman the right to equal authority within the household. While the *Real Peace Boys*’ narrative is personal, rather than generalised like the *New Home Brothers*, it still holds the same morality base, a foundation upon which no equal gendered communities can be built.

Although women have gained access to the performance of *isicathamiya*, it seems that they have not yet been released from the connotations surrounding them within the genre of *isicathamiya*. Women, are for now, only allowed to occupy a certain space

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<sup>7</sup> Original Zulu song text unavailable

within society, a space that allows them to express themselves but also a space that confines and defines them.

### **3.5 Summary**

The borders of *isicathamiya* are widening as performers gain new strategies for self-expression. The examples within this chapter show that young *isicathamiya* choirs are not content to exist within the space created by migrant performers. The re-location of the genre has stretched its boundaries and will continue to do so as contemporary international culture infiltrates the borders of the Emkhambathini communities. Through widening of the genre *isicathamiya* will find itself in a new and powerful position within not only the community but the South African nation at large.

## **Chapter 4: Masculinities**

In recent years, masculinity has become an important factor in determining the construction and shaping of identities within contemporary society. *Isicathamiya*, as a traditionally male genre, is highly influenced by notions and issues of masculinity. Through this chapter I hope to firstly contextualise masculinities within the larger Zulu nation in the later apartheid years through to 1994. The second part of this chapter will involve an analytical study of *isicathamiya* song texts in the light of the masculine identities highlighted in the first section as well new masculine identities born in recent times.

In order to gain an understanding of masculine identities within the space of the Zulu nation a broader understanding of the term 'masculinity' is needed. Masculinity is a socially constructed gender identity that manifests itself in many forms, physically and mentally. Masculinity itself is not a concrete term, it is made up of many different definitions, definitions which differ from culture to culture, from discourse to discourse and from individual to individual (Morrell, *Of Boys and Men* 607). Masculinity is a term that offers many different interpretations, for example R.W. Connell highlights contemporary society's idea of masculinity as an attribute, a part of a male which is either present or missing; for example, a male uninterested in sports activities may be dubbed 'unmasculine' by those around him (67). In this chapter however, I will be using the term masculinity according to Connell's brief definition;

'Masculinity', to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men



and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (71).

This definition provides for masculinity on three levels, as a site (or place), a practice and an effect. Throughout this chapter I hope to engage with masculinity on all three of these levels, allowing the masculine identities within *isicathamiya* to step off the stage and into the surrounding community where they are accepted, rejected or transformed by the audience. The audience themselves play a key role in the very conception of masculine identities within the performances, dictating the expectations of what is acceptable on the stage. For this reason, it is important to note that masculinity is a multilayered term that must be dealt with not only in terms of the holders of these identities but also in terms of those that receive it and respond to it.

Another term which is crucial to the understanding of masculine identities is 'hegemonic' masculinity. Again, Connell provides an excellent definition of the term:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (77).

Hegemonic masculinity suppresses not only the females in society but other forms of masculinity contrary to its dominant doctrine. The hegemonic masculine identity is important within *isicathamiya* because *isicathamiya* itself represent the formation of a new hegemonic masculine identity. Through acts such as *isicathamiya* performances the old rural masculine hegemony was disrupted and transformed into a new urban one that validated patriarchal beliefs within the new urban space. During this study I will attempt to shed light on the hegemonic masculine identity of the newly de-

urbanised *isicathamiya* youth performer, a performer that is faced with validating the role of the male within a totally new context.

#### **4.1 Masculinity in the ‘Zulu Nation’**

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s there was much violence and unrest within the largely Zulu province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Politically fuelled conflict between Inkatha and African National Congress members were aggravated by differing ideals of masculinity, ideals that were rooted deep within Zulu traditional culture. The most powerful Black-South African political force in Kwa-Zulu Natal until early 2004, Inkatha, used its position as the controlling force of the political Zulu nation to dictate terms of Zulu masculinity to its followers (Waetjen and Maré 195). With the widespread influence of Inkatha it is fair to say that Inkatha attempted by all means to create a hegemonic Zulu masculinity which allowed Zulu men to assert their dominance over gender relations and occupy a respected place in Zulu society.

Inkatha developed two strands of ‘Zulu masculinity’ within this period, creating a notion of a unique sense of manhood within the Zulu nation space. The first strand of Zulu masculinity stressed the difference between the present times of ill treatment and subjugation (within the apartheid system) and the historic past. This past was looked back on as a golden age for Zulu men where they conquered all other ‘masculine’ resistance and were the heads of their households and families. The notion of the ultimate ‘Warrior Nation’ was born through historical figures such as Shaka and, consequently, Zulu ethnicity was seen as something that represented superior strength and authority within the Zulu nation. (Waetjen and Maré 201 – 202)

The second strand of 'Zulu masculinity' was a Zulu worker identity. Zulu workers were portrayed as hard, tough men who battled in tough working conditions to support their families. Zulu workers were seen to be fulfilling their role as masculine figures by rising above the harsh conditions of apartheid wage labour in order to clothe and feed their families. The ability to work within the apartheid system and succeed was seen as a more desirable masculine quality than to try and work against it (Waetjen and Maré 202 – 203).

In the course of this chapter I wish to focus on the effects of these masculine identities within the youth *isicathamiya* performances of today. Many youth performers in Emkhambathini grew up in households supportive of the Inkatha policies, households that condoned these definitions of what Zulu masculinity is, and should be. Therefore, these two strands of Zulu masculinity have formed the foundation for many these performers' perceptions of acceptable Zulu masculine identity. Although this short history of Zulu masculinity is by no means comprehensive, it serves to highlight the importance of keeping Zulu masculinity a strong and powerful site of identity.

#### **4.2 Adapting Migrant Masculinities: The Masculine 'Provider'**

*Isicathamiya* is a genre born of the migrant masculinities that were formed under the oppression and isolation apartheid brought to black workers. Although apartheid is

now in the past, much of the contemporary aspects of *isicathamiya* are still rooted in these unique black masculine identities. The literal meaning of *isicathamiya*, to walk like a cat, suggests a step away from the ‘warrior’ masculinity mentioned above, a masculine identity that still embodied the strength of a hunter but also the surreptitious movement of the cat. Today young *isicathamiya* groups still approach their performances carefully, building tension slowly through each verse before breaking the loud and energetic *i-step* that ends each *isicathamiya* performance. Although it was the urbanisation of rural masculine identities that created the unique performance genre of *isicathamiya*, it is now the de-urbanisation of these migrant masculinities that allows the young Emkhambathini groups to create for themselves a niche in the genre.

Contrary to what many may think, migrant labour did not necessarily destroy existing forms of African masculinities, in fact, as Robert Morrell argues, “the institution of migrant worker served to perpetuate African masculinity” (*Of Boys and Men*, 623). This is perhaps best demonstrated in the Inkatha’s ‘worker’ identity outlined above, an identity that took the harsh conditions of migrant labour and used them to reinforce the masculine identity of the Zulu nation. Much of the youth within Emkhambathini do not have access to this masculine identity, not only due to the widespread reduction in migrant labour, but also due to the lack of any form of employment. Without an institution or trade to reinforce their masculinities these young men have evolved the workers’ identity into their own masculinity, accentuating the pain and suffering of poverty and unemployment. Like Inkatha’s worker masculinity this new form of ‘reverse migrancy’ acts to highlight the man’s physical toil in trying to fulfil his patriarchal duty. The *Lover boys*’ song on economy building emphasises the

suffering unemployment is causing;

*Abanye babashiwe izigaba ugozigaba bebeshelwe amacala ahluhlukene  
kaningi  
Ngenxa yokweswela imisebenzi  
Ngenxa yokweswela imali  
Kubuhlunga kuyadabukisa ukubona abantu bakithi behlupe ngahendlela*

Some are in jail, serving different sentences for different crimes  
Because there is no employment  
Because there is no money  
It is painful and sad to see people suffering like that  
(Translated by Wiseman Masango, Emkhambathini VC 14/04)

Not unlike the worker identity, extreme hardship is seen as the burden of modern day men seeking to carry out their duty to provide income for their households, unemployment however, not employment, is the cause of these hardships. The *Naughty Boys* (a well established Pietermaritzburg choir) also use unemployment and poverty to define their masculinity;

We have been to the firms to look for work  
There are no jobs  
How come?  
Because of the economy

What's happening to us is sad  
It's sad to us all  
I am working but I do not have any money  
I work but I do not have any money  
(Translator unknown)<sup>8</sup>

The sharp decrease in migrant work has forced these *isicathamiya* groups to seek a masculine identity that still emphasises the ability to survive in almost inhuman conditions. Apartheid is now in the past and poverty is the new oppressive system

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<sup>8</sup> Original Zulu song text unavailable

which these young men define their masculinity against. The battle against poverty is not dissimilar to the battle against white supremacy, each one forcing males to take strenuous and often humiliating steps in order to fulfil the needs of themselves and their families. Although this position initially seems one of powerlessness and subjugation it serves to ensure the masculine role within Zulu society. Here the patriarchal role of men is enforced through the re-affirmation of the suffering and hardship that these male performers go through in order to try and find employment and take up their position as providers of the household. This strand of masculinity relies heavily on the audience identifying that men have to perform the role of the 'provider', that they have no support to fall back on as they are the economic pillars within their household. Bearing in mind that this contemporary strand of masculinity was transformed from a migrant identity this attitude of the male provider is an understandable one. Deborah James acknowledges that most rural women relied solely on the earnings of their male migrant family members (9), a fact that could account for these performers' stagnant views of Zulu male patriarchal responsibilities. The role of the 'provider' was emphasised throughout the apartheid years by migrant *isicathamiya* performers, a point illustrated clearly by composer Alison Gumbi's song 'Reveal yourself, brother' where the singer reprimands his long lost sibling for deserting his family;

*Washiy' umakoti*

*Selokhu*

*Ahamba ethi uyosebenza*

*Manye sekuphelile unyaka welishumi. Singazi ukuthi washonaphi*

*Washiya ikhaya kanye nabantwana*

*Yasuk' insizwa*

*Yayosebenza eGoli*

*Yafik' eGoli kukuhle kunjena*

*Yabalahla bantwana ekhaya  
Obuyel' ekhaya mtaka baba!  
Izingane zilala zingadlile mfowethu  
Uhlala nent' ebomvu*

He left his wife behind...

Since he departed,  
Saying he was searching for work  
It is about ten years now. And we do not know his whereabouts...

You left your home and children  
The gentleman went away  
He went to work in Johannesburg  
He found good things in Johannesburg  
But he deserted his children at home  
Go back home, brother!  
The children go to sleep without food, brother  
Yet you are staying with a red thing [beautiful lady]  
(Cited in Erlmann, *Nightsong* 142-143)

In this particular text the importance of the masculine 'provider' is emphasised when the brother is told to return and fulfil his duties. This role forms the basis for all migrant labour and is the sole reasoning used by men when seeking employment away from home. As the above song illustrates the 'provider' is the most important role for a migrant to play, he must sacrifice everything else in order to carry out these duties to his family. This particular migrant has digressed from his duty and must return to his children in order to redeem himself and resume the role he initially set out to accomplish. Another factor apparent in this song text is the helplessness and vulnerability of the children without the presence of the father. Although there is mention of a wife, nowhere in the song does it specify if she herself is earning an income, even though this is highly likely due to the brother's extended period of absence. Similarly young Emkhambathini performers seem also to shy away from the idea of a woman providing for her family with little or no mention given to the female workforce within the area. Morrell identifies this rigid resistance towards women

occupying economic roles in South Africa; he draws attention to rural areas in Kwa-Zulu Natal where even simple laws that allow women access to economic services such as bank accounts have been met with heavy resistance from the local male population (*Changing Men in Southern Africa* 29). Also, based on the evidence presented in my previous chapter (under the heading ‘Women as subjects of performance’) it is clear to see that heavy resistance still exists when issues of gender equality are addressed within contemporary *isicathamiya*. The migrant notion of the ‘dependent’ female has been integrated into modern day rural masculinities. The re-working of these migrant masculinities within rurally based communities has helped Zulu males hold onto their patriarchal practices and beliefs. Males are still viewed within contemporary *isicathamiya* as the exclusive source of food and shelter for their families, even when (as is increasingly the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) they are unable to provide.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, contemporary *isicathamiya* performers still emphasise the hardship and suffering Zulu males endure in their quest to satisfy their roles as providers. It is also extremely important to remember that *isicathamiya* itself was born from the masculine need to provide for wives and children, even if it meant sacrificing life at home. *Isicathamiya* singers still feel the need to fill this role that those performers before them occupied from the 1930s until the early 1990s. In a sense, Zulu migrant masculinities have been removed from urban and industrial settings and taken into rural homesteads, the masculine identities that enabled Zulu workers to retain pride in their masculinity are being used by young men for the same purpose in the twenty-first century. The popular art of *isicathamiya* allows a platform, not unlike the political one used by Inkatha, to communicate and help create this new



masculine identity in a society where older masculine ideals are simply not attainable.

Although these groups have proved their ability to adapt masculinities towards contemporary societies the older migrant identities are still seen as highly desirable. In these groups' performances on poverty and suffering there is little satisfaction regarding these current masculinities that are being forced on poverty stricken Zulu males, the migrant lifestyle is seen as a desirable alternative to their current status. The song 'Savota' by *The Mighty Q Singers* is a good example of the current mind frame of young Emkhambathini Zulus;

*Ake nibheke imisenbenzi iyaphela  
Amafemu avalawe  
Siyabuza Bantu bakithi kuseyiyo leyo inkululeko  
Awu! Kusho ukuthi savotela ukuhlupheka kanti yini*

Look! There are no jobs  
Look! The factories are closed  
We are asking you our people  
Is this still freedom?  
Awu! We voted for poverty!  
(Transcribed and translated by Nkosinathi Sithole VC 5/03)

Although migrant factory labour limited the freedom of workers, tying them down to the urban environments they worked in, it provided the monetary wealth that allowed the free and confident expression of strong masculine identities through the patriarchal position of the worker and 'provider'. Apartheid employment systems allowed for Zulu men to assume this role while re-affirming their masculinity through the continuous contestation between brutal white authority and black resilience in their workplace. With the abolition of apartheid many of the factories employing these migrants were closed or relocated to areas that eliminated the need for migrant labour, creating a hole in Zulu masculinities. Morrell highlights the difficulties

experienced in black, post-apartheid communities when confronted with the realities of 'post-struggle' South Africa. Without a chance to assert their masculinities in the 'heroic struggle' within and against the system of apartheid (emphasised in Inkatha's strands of Zulu masculinity) young black men were left in often hopeless situations resulting from the subsequent drop in employment opportunities. With no site for these masculinities to develop black Zulu men struggled to regain their once proud masculine heritage. For this reason, factories and other places of migrant work are arguably sites of 'masculine freedom' where patriarchal rights are ensured and encompassment under a single hegemonic masculinity is achieved. This freedom to exist within a strong masculine identity is denied by the effects of poverty and expressed in songs such as 'Savota' where the *isicathamiya* youth clearly feel that new legislation has inhibited their sense of masculinity, rather than rebuilt it. Apartheid and migrancy allowed a flourishing black masculinity that gained heroic status from survival in the brutal conditions of white controlled factories and mines. However the *isicathamiya* youth have managed to salvage this masculine identity through the common trope of hardship and suffering and are building a new masculinity based on the trials of rural life in post-apartheid South Africa.

The *isicathamiya* youth in Emkhambathini are striving to create positive and heroic masculine identities within their communities through the re-working of the migrant masculinities of their fathers and grandfathers. The attempted creation of a new Zulu masculine hegemony, to quote Connell "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy" (77), shows that although the old strands of masculinity are admired and revered in many *isicathamiya* performances, the youth are conscious of need to re-

affirm their shattered masculinities in modern contexts, allowing performer and audience a new take on what constitutes black Zulu masculinity.

#### 4.3 Collective Authority and Hegemonic Masculinity

When an *isicathamiya* group is formed it brings with it a new lease of authority and power to its members that is not available to an individual. This authority allows the group to tackle issues with confidence while making for themselves a place in society to be seen and heard. As Liz Gunner points out, it allows the members to “forge a new self” through the formation of a group and the unique forms of song, dance and presence that is created within each new choir” (2005, 7). It is the structure and the protection of the group formation within *isicathamiya* that allows for more radical and unique masculine expression on the performative stage. The ‘unique presence’ of each group creates a collective self that belongs to the members of that group. In an interview with Nkosingathi Ndlovu of the *Mkambathini Try Singers* Imogen Gunner discusses how the melodies of each *Try Singers* song seem to intertwine and overlap. Nkosingathi confirmed this, stating that each song contained a common tune, a collective melody that is constant throughout each *Try Singers* performance (31). This musical signature serves to reinforce the new self and give rise to a unique masculinity within the collective grouping of each *isicathamiya* choir. Each choir’s performance is a distinctive collective action that uses different techniques and content to re-affirm identity and masculinity. Some Emkhambathini groups such as the *Lion Singers* choose to focus more on issues of love and courtship while many groups like the *Lover boys* or the *Table Mountain Messengers* direct their performances towards issues of AIDS, poverty and crime. The differing focus of these

groups suggests that there are a number of opinions within Emkhambathini as to what constitutes young Zulu masculinities. The importance of these unique collective performances in the construction of masculinities can be seen in the relationship between collectivity and masculinity;

Masculine identity is formed on a number of fronts. Collective action is a powerful mechanism for defining the content, and for determining the criteria for the distribution of that identity. At a psychological level, manliness may be 'confirmed' within a group through acts of collective violence against other men, through the destruction of other men's property, or through the rape of women, who frequently are viewed either as 'belonging' to enemy males or as 'vessels' of enemy regeneration (Waetjen and Maré, 1999).

Although Waetjen and Maré focus specifically on collective physical violence, it is clear that collective cohesion and co-operation play a huge role in not only the re-affirmation of masculinities but also in the creation of the content and substance of the identity. Young *isicathamiya* groups preach their messages collectively, a notion that is always re-affirmed in their songs and even in their movements (an issue discussed below). The Mkhambathini Try Singers' song, '*We remember about AIDS*', is an example of the collective force that is constantly emphasised when *isicathamiya* groups relay their messages;

*Siyakhuza*  
*Siyabababaza baphela abantu*  
*Ilesifo ilesifo esibi esibizwa ngengculazi*  
*Siyakhuza*

We warn you  
We are amazed at how many people are dying  
Because of this terrible illness called AIDS  
We warn you

(Transcribed by Wiseman Masango and Khulekani Ngubane. Translated by Liz Gunner, Cited in Imogen Gunner 54))

Here, each observation and warning is accentuated with the pronoun 'we' (especially noticeable in the repeated line 'we warn you'), highlighting them as views from a collective group, not just a singular person. The reinforcement of the group dynamic within the performance helps define the young *isicathamiya* performers' masculinity as one of protectors and wise voices within the community. While Waetjen and Maré focus on collective violence as a re-affirmation of manliness *isicathamiya* shows us that collective popular performances can also create and reiterate new ideas of masculinity, many of which distance themselves from violence and conflict. Through the popular performance of young Emkhambathini groups such as the Try Singers, new masculinities are formed that stem from popular art and expression allowing a new form of 'manliness' to spread into the rural areas. Samuel Kasule's work on popular performance in post-Idi Amin Uganda shows how popular arts can act as a force of change and regeneration in a society emerging from a highly traumatic past (42). Similarly the collective popular force of young *isicathamiya* groups is helping to re-define the role of the young male within post-apartheid society. The role of men has been forced to change post-1994 with popular arts such as *isicathamiya* giving men a chance to remain important and respected figures within their rural communities. No longer is it possible to rely solely on the identity of the masculine 'provider' (discussed above), new ways of re-affirming men's significance within the community have had to be constructed. Ironically, the performance genre of *isicathamiya* that was once created in the search for a unique urban masculinity, is now a key site for the conception of post-apartheid rural masculinities. It is important to note that the collective force of *isicathamiya* is not gained only from the members within each group but also from other groups. The common themes of AIDS, anti-violence and political dissatisfaction that abound within young *isicathamiya* groups'

performances serve to reiterate their place in society and therefore functions as a beacon for the re-thinking of masculine identities.

However, as I mentioned above, *isicathamiya* groups such as the *Lion Singers* concentrate on other areas of contemporary life such as romance and personal emotion. This song, transcribed during a competition in Emkhambathini that took place in late January 2003 is an example of a more personal narrative within *isicathamiya* performance;

Oh my! My parents got rid of me,  
Because I ignored their warnings  
I just left home...

I ask for forgiveness  
I ask my parents to forgive me  
Father I am coming back home  
Mother I am coming back home  
(Translated and transcribed by Dolly Simelane)<sup>9</sup>

Although *isicathamiya* performances on AIDS and other social issues are popular, the *Lion Singers* have one of the strongest audience followings in Emkhambathini among all the young choirs. The *Lion Singers* construct their masculinity through their own personal stories as opposed to other strategies of community centred narratives. This suggests that *isicathamiya* choirs and their audiences are not engaged in the construction and re-affirmation of one single hegemonic masculinity. The *Lion Singers* are not seen as existing on the fringes of masculinity through their performances, neither are they seen as resisting the more dominant masculine identities of those performers who chose to become voices warning and protecting the community. As I argued in the introduction to this chapter, all young *isicathamiya*

groups within Emkhambathini are collectively engaged in the creation of a single hegemonic masculinity that creates an important space for young males in rural areas in post-apartheid South Africa. This hegemonic masculinity does rely on melody or song text to define itself, rather the fact that these performances are taking place is enough to give meaning and credibility to hegemonic masculine identity of the *isicathamiya* performer. Karin Barber confirms this point when she alludes to the fact that some popular arts gain meaning just by way of the performance taking place, a phenomenon she says is found usually in repressive regimes (*Popular Arts in Africa* 2). Although, in terms of political legislation, apartheid has been abolished, the living conditions in rural areas such as Emkhambathini are often worse than they were during white rule with disease and unemployment claiming thousands of lives each year. The act of the *isicathamiya* performance helps in the construction of a hegemonic masculinity, encompassing the identity of black Zulu males as spokesmen and entertainers who strive to make their own interpretations of life situations communicable and accessible to the community at large. Older Zulu hegemonic masculinities gained patriarchal power from both the suffering they endured during apartheid and the monetary gain that suffering yielded them. Young rural *isicathamiya* performers strive to maintain patriarchal rights through the power of their words and their performances which are heard throughout rural communities and homesteads. Their voices are often the only ones that come from within the community and they speak directly to them. As Connell suggests, all hegemonic masculinities place women under sub-ordination and the young performers' new hegemony is no exception. By this almost exclusively male genre attempting to advise, counsel and entertain the community, women are put in danger of not being

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<sup>9</sup> Original Zulu text unavailable

given an equal voice within society. Although an active part of the *isicathamiya* audience, women mainly chose to express themselves through multi-gendered genres such as gospel where mixed sex groups are very common. Although this provides an outlet for female expression in communities such as Emkhambathini there is no female equivalent to the male dominated genre of *isicathamiya*.

Young *isicathamiya* performers have created unique masculine identities through the formation of choirs based on distinctive styles, movements and melodies. Although each group holds a slightly different view of 'manliness', be in dress, performance subjects or dance, they exist under one hegemonic masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity designates the young Zulu male as an entertainer and community spokesperson who plays a vital role in communicating societies problems in the language of their audience. This suggests the Robert Connell's view of hegemonic masculinity as 'one form of masculinity' (77) might prove a narrow definition, especially in light of this study. Although hegemonic masculinity might indeed suggest a 'currently accepted strategy' (77) for the defence of the patriarchy it does not mean that this strategy is limited to one form of action or interpretation. Young *isicathamiya* choirs have shown to equally fill the masculine role of spokesmen and entertainers while approaching the task at totally different angles. In short, young *isicathamiya* choirs show us that hegemonic masculinities do not choke or curb creative insight or artistic inspiration, although they subscribe to the same ideal, they do not always follow the same path.





The *Lion Singers* pose for a photograph outside the Emkhambathini No. 3 Community Hall

#### 4.4 Performing Masculinity through the Body

The body is a key part in the power of *isicathamiya* and an area that has experienced a noticeable shift since *isicathamiya*'s move from urban to rural areas. The importance of studying the body in relation to masculinities is perhaps an obvious one. Robert Connell suggests that masculinity is seen to 'proceed' from the body. By expressing or limiting actions that define different types of masculinities (e.g. violence or homosexuality) the body can be signifier as to the masculinity of the person within (45). The dance and movement of *isicathamiya* performers allows them to add another layer of meaning to their performances. Through the expression or limitation of actions they are able to communicate a side of their masculine identity which would remain otherwise hidden within the boundaries of verbal expression.

When German anthropologist Veit Erlmann questioned a number of Durban based *isicathamiya* performers on the controlled nature of their dancing they replied, "We move stealthily so that the song does not run away. It is like proposing love to the ladies. You have to approach them cautiously, lest the women will run away." Evidently the present day youth of *isicathamiya* have also heeded this warning, although their movements are slightly more energetic and flamboyant than those of older generations, they still maintain this all important element of control. Presenting sensitive issues to an audience worn out with the effects of AIDS, violence, poverty and unemployment requires a certain degree of tact, an asset which the youth certainly possess. The *isicathamiya* choir, the *Lover boys* showcase this with a cautious start to their performance. Their message takes the shape of a sympathetic appeal to the people:

*Kulunyaka sikhungethwe izinhlupheko  
Kulunyaka esiphila kuwo sikhungethwe usizi  
Babengconu ababamkhulu kabephila ngemfuye yabo  
Isikathi asisavumi ukuba siphile ngemfuyo  
Siyanicela Bantu bakithi ukuba sakhe umnotho walelizwe*

In these times we are faced with poverty  
In these times we are faced with sadness  
Our grandfathers were better off because they could rely on their livestock  
These times do not allow us to rely on livestock  
We are asking you, our people, to build the economy of our country  
(Transcribed and translated by Wiseman Masango, VC 14/04)

Throughout this verse the choir members alternate from a standing prayer position to a simple yet compassionate stance where members place one white gloved hand over their heart and the other at the side of their tilted head. This is later followed by the crossing and uncrossing of the wrists as the choir reiterates the impossibility of traditional Zulu subsistence living. These actions allow the performers to add a heightened level of emphasis to their songs while simultaneously placing the choir more deeply within the subjects of the performative text itself. The pain and sadness within the community are embodied by the performers, an act which places them in a position of discursive authority, an authority which they recognise and use in the last line of the verse through the appeal to the people to build the economy. It is this understanding yet authoritative voice which allows the *Lover boys* to communicate their message to an audience scarred by horrific and unimaginable tragedies. Although these movements themselves are not clearly authoritative actions, their incorporation into the performance as a whole grants the *Lover boys* a greater authority in regards to their audience. Joan Wardorp's study of 'professional masculinities' within the Soweto Flying Squad yields a similar example of tact and caution that results in a more effective relay of authority;

In the eyes of experienced Flying Squad members then, rampant egos, macho attitudes and danger are often synonymous. The antidote is the construction of intensely-reflexive masculinities which enable the framing of multiple functional and externalised presentations of the self which are positioned in very particular circumstances (257).

Much like the Soweto Flying Squad, the *Lover boys* adopt a 'professional masculinity' when addressing their target audience. The slow and almost sorrowful movements are an embodiment of a masculinity adopted for that specific performance and audience. The reflexive nature of this 'professional masculinity' is seen when the *i-step* commences at the end of the performance. Chanting the line "Brothers and sisters lets come together and build the economy, lets come together and build the economy" the *Lover boys* instantly adopt a more positive and energetic style of movement. Through the repetition of this encouraging message the choir engages in a high-energy dance during which the rigid formation of the performance is broken and the leader of the choir is joined by several other members. High kicks reminiscent of traditional war dances are included in the *i-step* and the choir members adopt a much more aggressive strategy of movement, providing a thumping melody to each syllable of their song. The audience also responds by way of appreciative whistling and shouting as the *Lover boys* raise the tempo of their dance to an even higher level. As the performance comes to an end it is apparent that the *Lover boys* have used their bodies to adapt and change their masculine identities according to the subject and purpose of their performance. The transformation from the softer, gentler movements to the aggressive and energetic *i-step* shows a change in the masculine fronts presented to the audience throughout the performance. Choir members, through their bodies, were able to change from a weaker yet more benevolent masculine identity to an assertive and dominant masculinity during the last message conveyed through the

*i-step*. The different strategies utilised by the *Lover boys* has resulted in the construction of numerous masculine fronts or ‘selves’ that are used in different parts of the performance to engage the audience and grant authority to the choir.

Through this particular performative text, the *Lover boys* have shown that the construction of masculine ‘fronts’ or ‘professional masculinities’ through the body influence the meaning and reception of each performance. The body plays a vital role in how each performance is viewed and allows the performer to change and shape their masculinity even during a performance.

#### **4.5 The Leader**

Although the *Lover boys* seek to convey messages through their songs, they also strive for the aesthetic and aural appeal that will allow them to not only gain the attention of the audience, but also the approval of the judges and a placing in the competition. The leader of an *isicathamiya* choir is a dominating presence in many young groups and the primary focus of the audience during the performance. The leader of the *Lover boys*, S’Thembiso Ngidi, stands in front of his choir, dressed in a black blazer and black pants, his light brown shoes stand out amongst the all black procession of footwear behind him. Rather than simply copying the actions of his choir, he engages in his own performance, raising his body during high notes and sinking to the ground for low ones; his hands performing an endless series of uneven upward motions in time to each syllable of the song. These movements do not seem to mimic the sounds of the choir but seem rather to invoke them; he often cries out the first word of a verse before allowing the rest of the choir to join in. Screams of delight

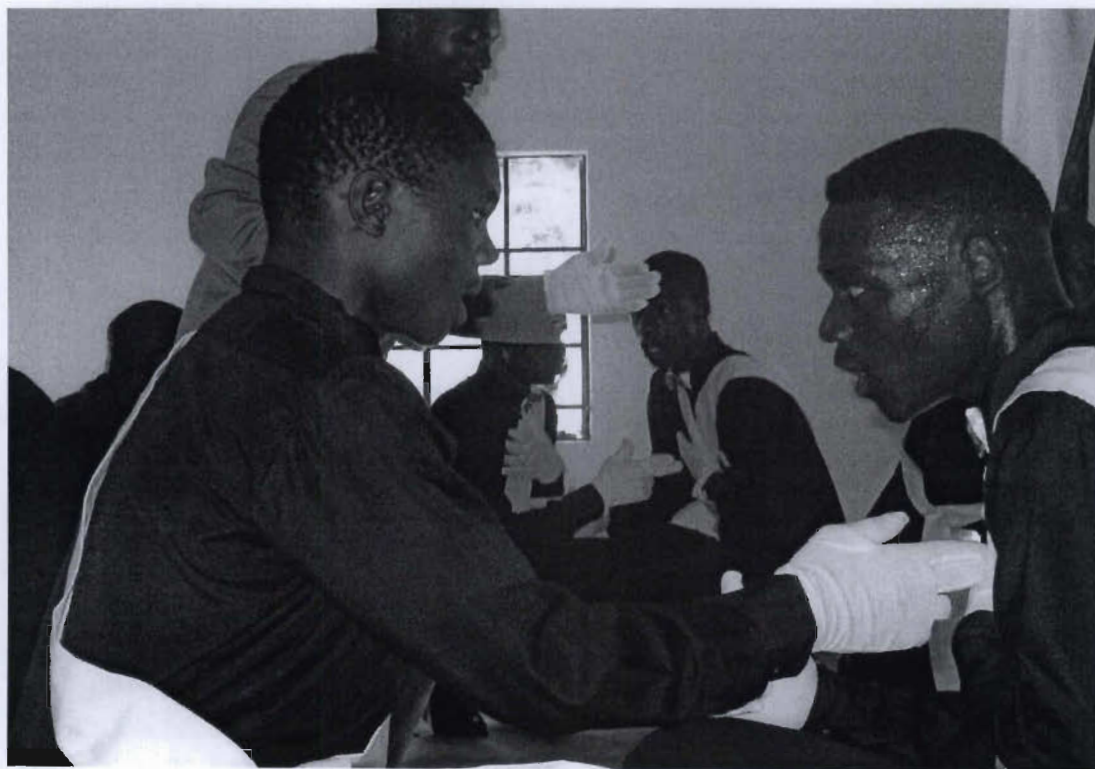
and amazement can be heard from the audience as his exaggerated movements fill the stage, his white-gloved hands delicately drawing each word from the choir's mouth. The leader holds a contradictory position within the performance, not adhering to the composed, ordered movements of the genre but at the same time invoking them through his unstructured command of his choir. As the centre of focus for most of the performance, the S'Thembiso definitely sets himself apart in terms of power and hierarchy. His individual performance brings new and unique meanings to the choir's song as a whole. The fact that *isicathamiya* leaders like S'Thembiso create a hierarchy of command within this masculine genre suggests that even though much strife is undergone to preserve superior societal status over women, there still exists a need for individual males to lead within their greater patriarchal communities. Although *isicathamiya* choirs may be seen as reflecting an image of a concurrent masculine identity within each choir, the position of the leader suggests that that might not be the case. The choir almost functions as a background to the leader's performance as he commands the audience's attention, his free movement imposed on the almost stagnant collection of singers behind him only further serving to create a large space between him and the rest of the choir. However, this 'space' does not denote alienation on the part of the choir or the leader, it is instead part of a complex reinforcement of the choir's masculinity. The position of a 'masculine leader' is not a new one in Zulu society. As my explanation above of Waetjen and Maré's 'two strands of Zulu masculinity' illustrates, masculine figures such as Shaka were seen as key components in Zulu masculine identity. These leaders initiated the success of the Zulu nation and provided the control and discipline that enabled the Zulus to establish their vast empire. Therefore, the leader figure denotes the presence of authority and discipline while also asserting the choir members' masculinity through the

reclamation of traditional Zulu identities.

#### **4.6 Summary**

Through this chapter I have attempted to highlight some of the ways young Zulu men are dealing with the assertion of masculine identity and patriarchal power in a society that no longer relies solely on the male population for survival. Throughout all my observations a strong emphasis arose on the importance of reclaiming 'old' or 'traditional' masculine rights and identities in societies where young men are often unemployed and unable to support themselves. Although this may be a controversial attitude in academic and political circles, I believe this allows the performers an outlet to gain the hope, respect and privilege that their poverty-stricken societies cannot otherwise grant them.





S'Thembiso Ngidi (front right) performing as part of the *Mkambathini Try Singers*



## Conclusion

South Africa has recently celebrated ten years of democracy. These ten years however have not been easy for the rural communities of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The young *isicathamiya* choirs within these communities are faced with poverty, unemployment, AIDS and violence as they struggle to create their own space within rural life. *Isicathamiya* is an outlet for these young performers to express their opinions and identities while also enabling them to gain stature in a society where young men are so often unable to gain the respect and status of their fathers and grandfathers.

*Isicathamiya* allows the youth to effectively engage and critique older systems of knowledge and implement new ones through their performances. *Isicathamiya* represents an old system of rules and meanings which have been stretched and re-interpreted by contemporary youth and used in the affirmation of new identities. The subsequent de-urbanisation of *isicathamiya* within these rural communities has given the genre a whole new audience who never had regular access to the genre or the effects it produced in the city.

Importantly these choirs do not seek to erase or ridicule the past; instead they seek their own place within it. The re-adaptation of tradition, boundaries of performance and masculine identities are all projects the youth engage in to find a place within the entanglement of the past that speaks to their generation. Throughout this we are able to see the 'infinite elasticity' of *isicathamiya*, a genre encompassing both elements of the past, present and future, a genre that can re-defined and adapted by countless generations to come.

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## Appendix A

16 May 2004, Emkhambathini

Interview between author (Robert Mowatt) and *Lover boys* member Jan Mbuli

Robert: What do you enjoy most about singing *isicathamiya*?

Jan: It is because it is traditional music y'know so we like it very much. We feel it in our blood. The main thing in *isicathamiya* we are singing about each and everything that is happening around here inside South Africa like about rape, murder, all those sorts of things. We are trying to make people avoid these things 'cos even our music which we are going to compete with it is about all that is happening here in South Africa and we are trying to get people to avoid those things. Each and every choir is dealing with that, we have noticed that, that's why I like *isicathamiya*. Maybe we will be lucky and people will hear our music.

Robert: Who right now is listening to *isicathamiya*, is it the young or the old ...?

Jan: I can't say right now but all of the people can listen to *isicathamiya* because adults can sing for the adults and the young can sing for the young.

Robert: Do you compose your own songs?

Jan: All of the songs which you hear us sing are our own compositions.

Robert: Were there any choirs which influenced you when you were young and made you want to become *isicathamiya* singer?

Jan: Ladysmith Black Mambazo, - if we are lucky we are going to be like that. But all I know is that each choir is wishing to be overseas because we'd like to give these messages to all the people around the world.

Robert: Can an *isicathamiya* singer make enough money to sing fulltime?



Jan: No, but only two of us (*Lover boys*) work fulltime

Robert: How old is *isicathamiya*, how long have people been singing it?

Jan: It is very old, very traditional. But you know kwaito music and R&B?

Robert: Yes

Jan: Before there was no R&B, now there is R&B. It is the same like *isicathamiya*, we change the form, change the rhythm, but the message is still there.

Robert: Do you use any kwaito and R&B in your songs?

Jan: We listen to everything, kwaito, R&B, *isicathamiya*, gospel and we use all of them in our songs

Robert: I went to go watch Mafunze Black Singers in Elandskop the other day and there was a woman in the group, how do you feel about women singing in *isicathamiya*? Is it only for men?

Jan: You know what? You can sing anything, it doesn't matter who you are, you can sing *isicathamiya* if you want

Robert: Thank you so much